

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

ANNUAL REPORT

1st April 2018 – 31st March 2019

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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 Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Committee, established by the IRO Handbook (2010).
- 1.2 Following presentation to the Thurrock Corporate Parenting Committee, Overview and Scrutiny and the Thurrock Safeguarding Children's Partnership, 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 1st of April 2018 until the 31st of March 2019. 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.

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 stable with one member of staff who has been on long term sickness absence. This post has been covered by an internal secondment since February 2019. 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. All have substantial experience of effective direct work with children and young people.
- 5.3 There are 4 female and one male IRO and the IRO come from diverse 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

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Average Case Load	56	67	67	61	62
Case Load Range	58-62	62-67	60-68	62-65	44-68

- 6.1 The average IRO case load remained stable throughout the year with IRO's having on average 62 cases.
- 6.2 In 2018 – 2019 One member of staff was on long term sick which impacted on IRO case loads, with 50 children having to be distributed across the other 4 IRO's taking the average to 78 cases for a short while until a secondment arrangement was recruited to and came into post in February 2019.
- 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 the 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

<u>Due in Month</u>	<u>Apr-18</u>	<u>May-18</u>	<u>Jun-18</u>	<u>Jul-18</u>	<u>Aug-18</u>	<u>Sep-18</u>	<u>Oct-18</u>	<u>Nov-18</u>	<u>Dec-18</u>	<u>Jan-19</u>	<u>Feb-19</u>	<u>Mar-19</u>	<u>Year To Date</u>
Total Due	61	79	50	40	74	81	60	74	60	85	26	73	763
Total Held	61	79	50	40	74	81	60	73	59	81	25	72	755
Total Held In Timescale	48	74	44	40	72	78	56	66	56	76	25	71	706
Percentage of 'Total Due' Held In Timescale	79%	94%	88%	100%	97%	96%	93%	89%	93%	89%	96%	97%	93%
Held In Quarter	190			195			192			178			
Percentage Held In Timescale	87%			97%			93%			97%			

- 6.4 During the performance year April 2018 – March 2019, the IRO service conducted a total of 755 reviews, which is an increase on the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, improved during the year, with the final average being 93% of reviews held within timescales.

In the small number of cases not held on time these were the factors which affected performance:

- The IRO service not being notified early enough that children had become looked after and so there was a delay in booking the 1st review meeting
- Change 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, IRO, social worker, carer, or report not available and so the review had to be cancelled

We will continue to improve the timeliness of reviews in 2019/2020 to achieve performance between 95%– 98%. We have improved communication when children are admitted to care which has led to 100% of initial reviews being completed within timescales currently.

Children and Young People's Participation in Reviews:

Participation	Total 2017 /2018	Total 2018/19
Not Recorded	105	0
PN0 Child aged under 4 at time of meeting	85	100
PN1 Child attended & spoke for self	332	372
PN2 Child attended - advocate spoke	5	3
PN3 Child attends and conveys his/her view symbolically (non-verbally)		2
PN4 Child attended without contributing	4	5
PN5 Child not attended, advocate briefed with views	12	3
PN6 Child not attended, views sent	122	159
PN7 Child not attended & did not send views	83	103
Grand Total	750	747

This year children participated in person or through an advocate or by another means in 84% of their reviews (excludes Children under 4 years of age). This was an improvement on last year's performance of 72%.

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 2018-2019, reasons given for non-attendance related to – older children making an informed choice that they did not wish to attend their reviews, 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.

A key priority for the IRO service in 2019-2020 is improving the level of participation in reviews. To assist this we have:

- Adopted the mind of my own app, this is a nationally recognised and used communication system specifically designed to get the views of looked after children. It uses innovative software which can be used on tablets or mobile phones and allows the child/young person to communicate directly with their IRO in a friendly format which prompts them to talk about their needs. The app was launched in June 2019 and is already beginning to make an impact. This is a key project and we have created a cross departmental governance board to deliver this important and exciting new approach to engagement.
- Extended our contract with the advocacy provider Open Door. As part of this contract we have asked Open Door to contact every child over 7 who has become looked after and introduce themselves and explain the role of an advocate. The aim is to ensure our young people know about advocacy and that it is their right.
- We have created and appointed a Children's Participation Worker – specifically to promote and develop approaches to child participation. The officer came into post in May of 2019 and her first task was in delivering the Mind of My Own app alongside the lead IRO.

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.

The target for having these review outcome reports completed and distributed to young people, parents and professionals is within 20 working days of the review. At the beginning of 2018/19 performance was under 50%, by mid-year it had improved to 75% and by 2019 it was 100% and in the first quarter of 2019/20 performance has been maintained at 100%.

The target is to maintain this good performance during 2019/20.

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 return rate was very low. The introduction of the Mind of My Own app is designed to supplement these forms and increase the amount of feedback received.

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

Numbers of Children in the care of Thurrock

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Number	284	333	334	308	293
Rate per 10,000	71	81	79	72	68.4
UASC	39	64	55	32	30
Adopted	13	7	9	7	13

At 31 March 2018, the number of children looked after by local authorities in England increased, up 4% to 75,420 from 72,590 in 2017, continuing increases seen in recent years. This is equivalent to a rate of 64 per 10,000 in 2018, which is up from 62 per 10,000 in 2017 and 60 per 10,000 in 2016.

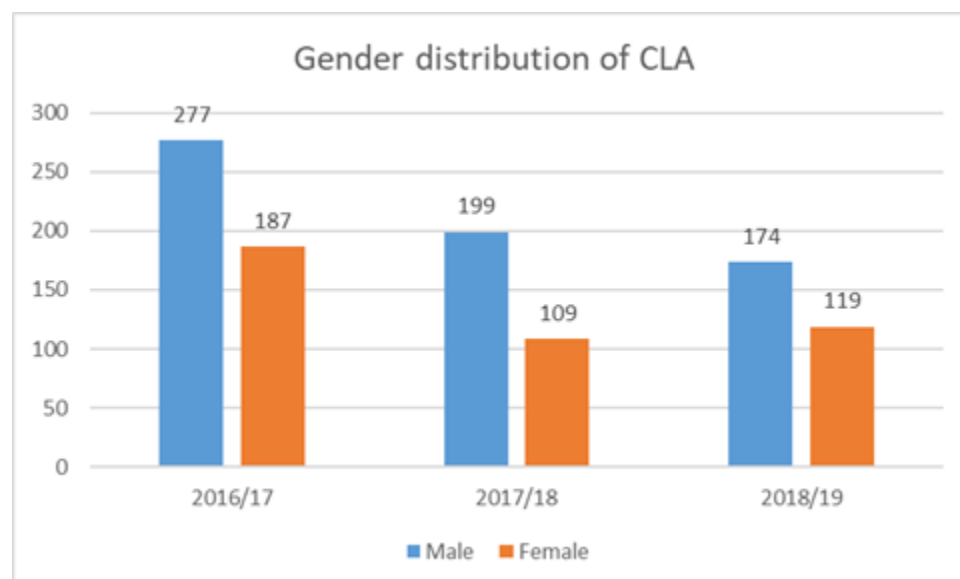
In Thurrock there has been a reduction in the number of children Looked after from March 2017 to April 2019. This has included a reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children down to 30 from 64 in March 2016.

Thurrock's rate of children looked after in 2019 was 68.4 children per 10,000. Although this is slightly higher than the England average of 64 per 10,000 it is lower than the average of similar authorities (statistical neighbours) which for 2018 was 69.5 per 10,000. This also represents a sustained reduction in the number of children looked after over the past three years, which is better than the National and statistical neighbour performance which has seen a year on year increase over the past three years.

Nationally in 2017, 4,370 children looked after were adopted and this has decreased further by 13% to 3,820 in 2018. This is in line with the decrease in the number of looked after children with a placement order seen over recent years, which has fallen from 9,590 in 2014 to 5,360 in 2018.

In Thurrock there were 13 adoptions completed in 2018/2019, which is nearly double the previous years performance. There has been a renewed emphasis on permanency planning during 2018/19 and we have introduced weekly permanency tracking panels at which the IRO service is represented. These panels combat drift and ensure that a focus is maintained on achieving permanency for children in care.

Gender of Children and Young People in Care:



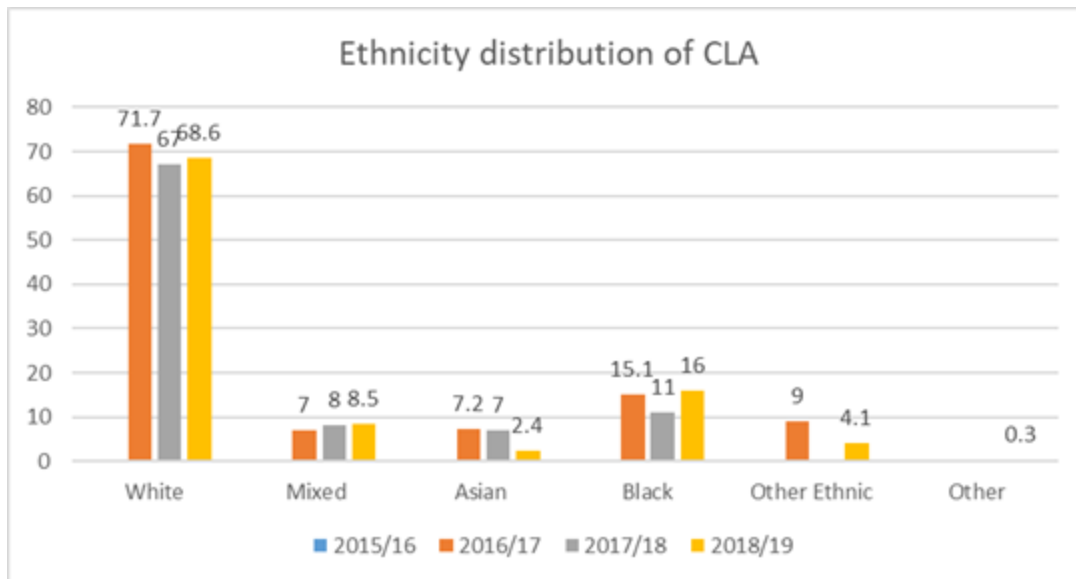
Over a three-year period the gender distribution of children looked after in Thurrock is interesting. The number of girls has remained fairly constant especially from 2017/18 to 2018/19; the number of boys has reduced this year, partly reflected in the reduction of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

There is still a higher proportion of boys looked after, factors which can be affecting this relate to issues 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 British	80.91%	79.75%
All non-White British	19.09%	20.25%
All black, African , Caribbean and black British	7.82%	3.47%
All Asian and Asian British	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 slight increase in the number of Black or Black British children and children from other ethnic groups. There has been a reduction in the number of Asian or Asian British Children.

Children from Asian/Asian British backgrounds represent 2.4% of the children looked after by Thurrock which is a reduction from last year's 8%. This is now closer to the local Asian British population which represents 3.7% of the total population in Thurrock.

Children from Black/Black British backgrounds represent 16% of the looked after population as opposed to being 7.82% of the total population. This is an increase from last year where 11% of children came from Black/Black British Backgrounds, but the percentage of children from Black/Black British backgrounds remain higher than the total population for the past years.

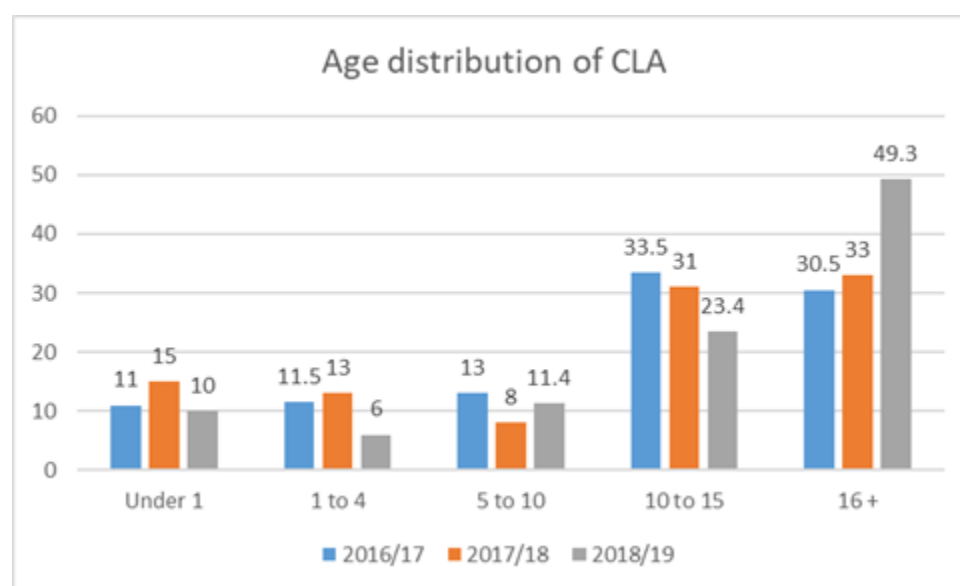
Identity is a core factor considered within the dimensions on developmental need (Care Planning Guidance 2015). This domain concerns the child's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. It is important for a child who is in care to know who s/he is and where s/he has come from, and also 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.

Racial and cultural identity is an important aspect of identity for many Children Looked After. 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.

During 2019 the IRO service will conduct a review to explore the reasons for an increased number for Black/Black British children in care alongside the quality of matching children with placement which meet their ethnic, identity, religious and cultural needs and make recommendations to the Children looked after service.

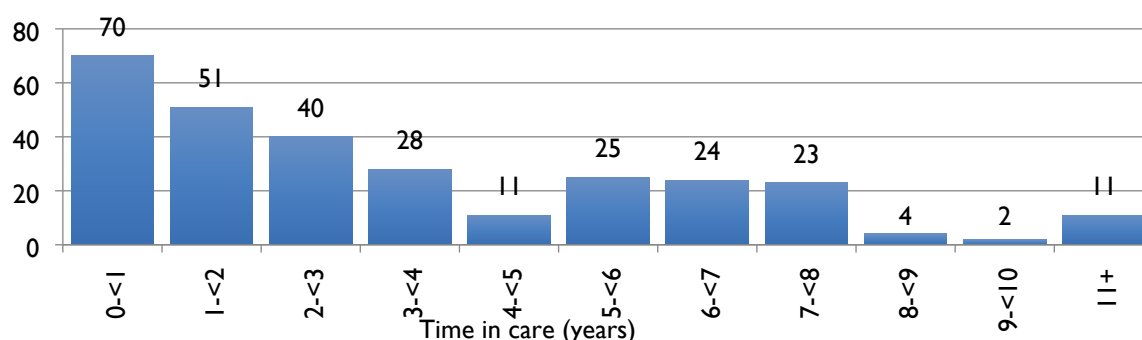
Age of Children and Young People in Care



The age distribution represents improving practice in Thurrock, where the majority of children under five are moved on to permanency through adoption or placement with connected carers. Those currently being looked after under 5 are progressing through the court and permanency plans are underway. The impact of this can be seen in the number of children 5-10, where fewer children are remaining in care beyond five years old.

The older age groups 10-15 and 16+ represent children who have remained in our care for a number of years, the 31 asylum seeking young people and a number of older adolescents who have been accommodated due to the risk of exploitation. This group of young people tend to have more complex needs and challenges around education. The challenge for the IRO service is to ensure there is effective transition planning for these children and that they leave care with the skills and support necessary to achieve their goals.

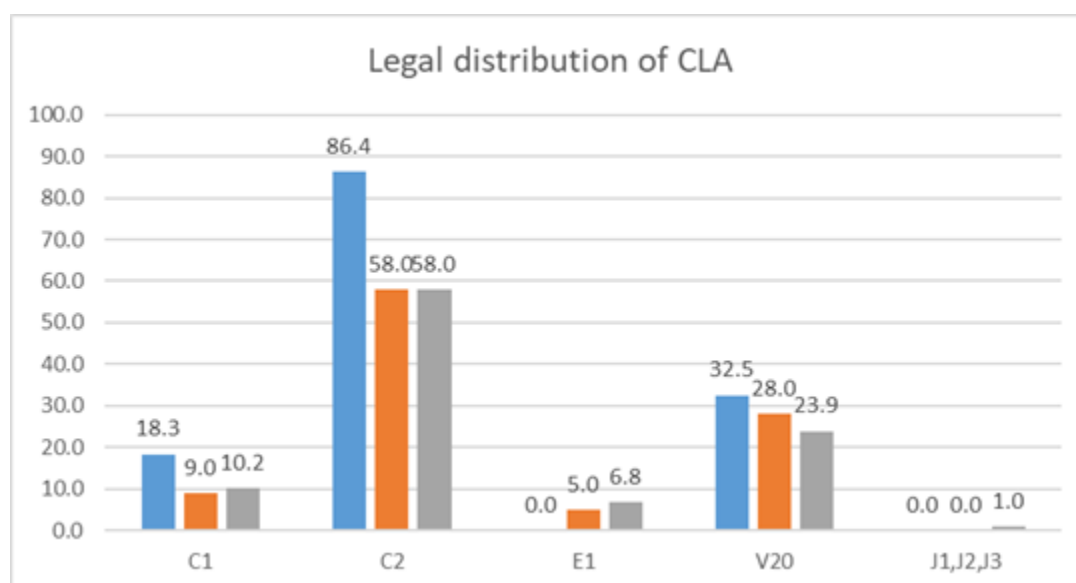
Time in Care for Children and Young People



This graph shows that last year's trend has continued with fewer children remaining in care long term and the majority of children coming into care for between 1 and 3 years.

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.



C1 = Interim Care Order

C2 = Care Order

V2 = Single Period of Accommodation under Section 20 CA 1989 (voluntary)

E1 = Placement Order (permission for adoption)

J1/J2/J3 = on remand, committed for trial or detained

Nationally at 31 March 2018, 55,240 (73%) children looked after were looked after under a care order, up from 40,090 (58%) in 2014. At 31 March 2018, 14,500 (19%) children were looked after under a voluntary agreement (s.20), down from a peak of 19,320 (28%) in 2015.

In Thurrock 75% of children are looked after through care orders and 23% are looked after on a voluntary basis (Section 20 of the Children Act 1989). The main reason for accommodation is due to concerns about the children's welfare. The other reason is the provision of specialist accommodation for children with a disability. This represents improved practice with a focus on ensuring children in care do not drift and there are permanency plans in place for them to move them on quickly from the care system into more permanent arrangements.

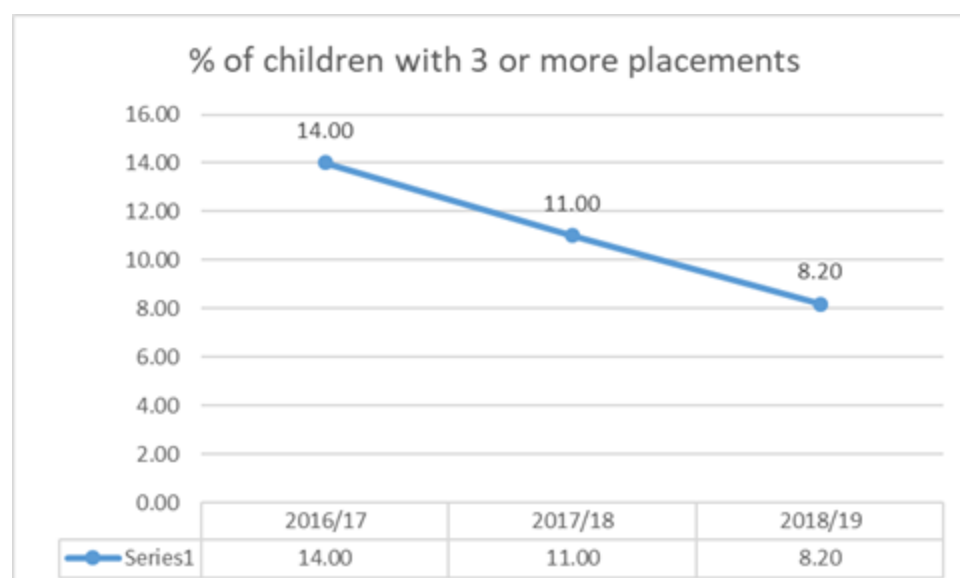
The majority of children looked after by Thurrock are subject to legal proceedings where they have suffered some form of abuse or neglect and the accommodation is being used to protect them from further harm and to secure permanency for these children.

This is in line with national and local trends where children's services use of accommodation is increasingly being targeted on children at the highest risk. In Thurrock we have increased services, including a new family's together team to divert children with lower level needs from the care system.

The number of placement orders which allow the authority to place a child for adoption have been increasing over the past three years and in 2018/19 there were 16 placement orders granted. This allows children to be placed with their permanent families in a timely manner.

The challenge for the IRO service is to ensure that plans are being carried out in timescales which meet the child's need.

Placement Stability of Children and Young People in Care.

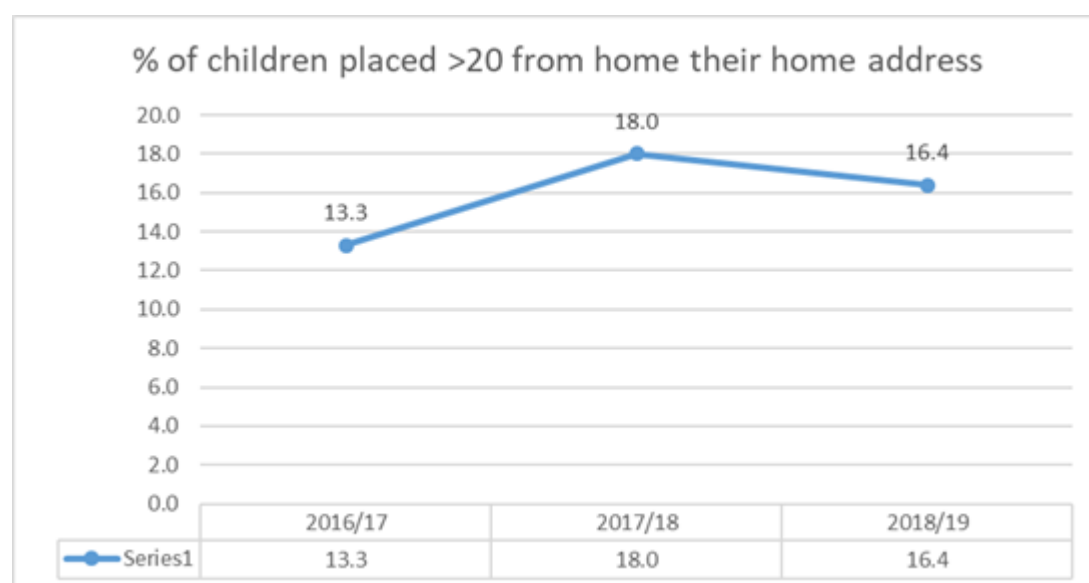


There is an improving picture of placement stability in Thurrock with a continuous fall in the number of children having three or more placement moves. This is partly related to the emphasis on permanency moving children out of the care system at the earliest possibility. It is also seen in the number of older adolescents who have been in longer term stable placements.

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 8.2% in comparison to the England and statistical neighbour averages of 10% which represents very good performance.

Placement Location of Children and Young People in Care

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

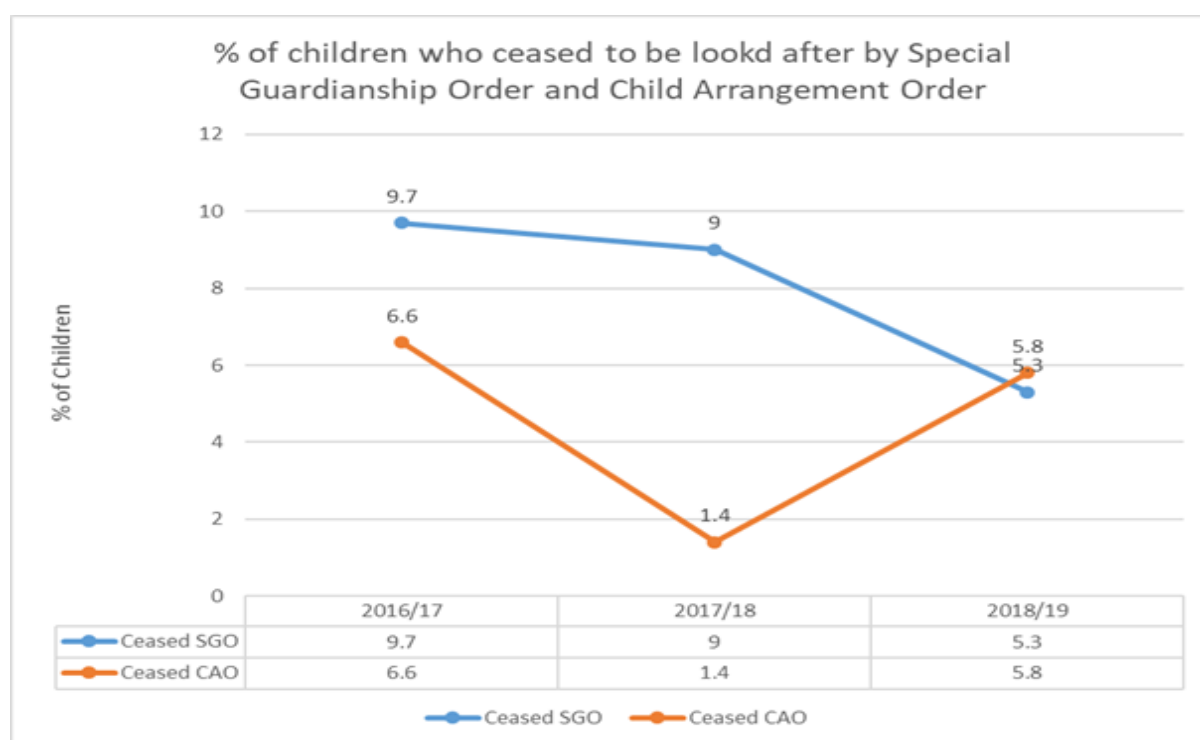


In England at 31 March 2018 there were 26% of children looked after placed more than 20 miles from their home. In Thurrock we have reduced this to only 16% of our looked after children which represents good practice. The service recognises the need for every effort to be made to place children as close 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 due to the nature of the needs, 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 appropriately bring the children closer to home is taken.

Use of Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders

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 (CAO) 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 Orders. Both an SGO and CAO are routes to permanence for looked after children.



Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement 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, providing for a higher degree of commitment from the carer and a better chance of long term permanency for the child.

In Thurrock 5.3% of children left care through special guardianship, nationally 11% and 5.8% through child arrangement orders, nationally 4%. This performance is partly a reflection of the increasing numbers of children who have been long term fostered who are now over sixteen for whom a SGO or CAO may not be appropriate. There has been an increase in the use of CAO's by the Courts for children during proceedings.

The IRO service will continue to review the use of special guardianship and child arrangement orders. The reviewing service will need to carefully scrutinise plans to identify the possibility of using special guardianship and child arrangement orders.

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.

In July 2018 the IRO service developed a compliance checklist which was completed at each review. This allowed the IRO service to address process problems such as reports not completed for the review through the checklist. Individual checklist were sent to service managers and team managers to raise practice issues. The checklist themselves were analysed and the learning presented to the monthly performance meetings.

This had the result of reducing the use of the dispute resolution process for simple process issues.

Formal Disputes Raised 2018-2019

The IRO Service recorded 15 completed dispute resolutions which were about the following issues.

There were no disputes which had to be referred to the Corporate Director of Children Services or CAFCAS .

Number	Area of Practice Raised
2	Local Authority Pathway Plan/Transition plan for child leaving care was challenged and had to be amended
8	Permanency Plan for the child was not robust enough and had to be changed
1	Challenge to Local authority plan for Contact
2	An issue regarding the plan for the child's education had to be addressed
1	Specific Advocacy was requested for parents to participate in the review process

IRO Compliance Checklist

The IRO Checklist, introduced in July 2018 has been used as a way of providing a monthly dip sample into the quality of services provided to Children Looked After.

Some of the key practice areas captured through the IRO Checklist are: timeliness of CLA Reviews, the quality of care/pathway plans, participation of children/young people and their carer's and completion of CLA visits, PEPs, Health assessments and case summaries.

Key findings from the checklist this year:

- Social work reports were not always provided in a timely way to the review
- Children fully participate in 84% of their reviews
- The consultation booklets are poorly used
- In a number of Reviews looked after children have experienced a change of social worker since the last review
- There has been a problem with completing initial health assessments

This has led the service to review the use and design of consultation booklets, challenge teams about the production of reports, and work with the CLA service and Designated Nurse to review the process for the commissioning of initial health assessments.

Feedback from the Children in Care about the IRO Service

The children participation officer completed an initial survey with the children in care council and the other young people in care

What the young people said:

What works well:-

- Consistency of IROs which allows for a "bond" to be made and understanding between child and IRO. Particularly important where there are regular changes of social workers.

- IRO got to know the young person and recognised when breaks were needed for the Young Person during the reviews.
- IRO made sure Young Person was listened to and not talked over.
- IRO made sure that Young Person was informed of grants etc. they could apply for that they otherwise were not told about.
- Making sure the child feels welcome, it is their meeting after all.
- Being a person or people that were not social workers or involved directly in your case helped to talk about particular concerns, worries and wishes.
- It helped with relationship difficulties and overcoming certain problems,
- It helped me plan for my future, what I needed to do to get to where I wanted to be and who will be there to support me if needed.
- Involved collaborating with other services that would best help me at that particular time when looked after. Especially as a young person it is hard to know what is available and where to turn. Sometimes you just need that guidance.

What Children and young people value about their IROs:-

- Honesty
- Trust
- Communication
- Confidence
- Hearing the YP's views
- Empathy
- Understanding
- Good listener
- Experience
- Patience
- Independent
- Equal power with looked after children
- Self-awareness
- Appropriate language (no jargon)
- Compassion

What does not work as well?

- Young People felt at times put on the spot to discuss feelings during meetings with everyone sitting around which was uncomfortable.
- One young person said they were not always given a choice of who was present, one professional made them feel uncomfortable, but they didn't feel able to speak up about this.
- One young person said that changes in social worker meant that their Aftercare plan was not done until they had turned 18.
- Young people said they *Didn't always feel like she could say what she wanted to say during meetings.*
- One young person said, *I often chose not to engage, not be involved and not be at the meetings.*

Young people's suggestions as to what we can do to improve the service:-

- Hold a short pre-meeting to ensure that the plan is shared, everyone has information, actions and can come to the Children's Looked After review prepared to ensure progression of the plan.
- Give children the choice of who is invited, what is discussed, where it is held.
- Recognise where Children and Young People may need time out or where they might be uncomfortable discussing certain things in the meeting.
- Sometimes views are not taken seriously enough.
- IRO'S should be able to challenge local authorities that are not always making best decision for the child.
- More encouragement to attend reviews.
- Maybe in a different environment than a foster carer's house, child gets choice as to where they are.
- Maybe more conversation with the young person on how the meeting is to run and who it will involve, if they would feel comfortable with certain people their etc. Some young people may prefer smaller meetings with fewer people. It may encourage them to engage more.

This very helpful feedback has been considered by the IRO service and will form part of 2019/20 work plan.

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.

IRO practice over the last year is less variable there were more examples of good recording of children's views and wishes; however, this was not always consistently found in the cases audited.

Practice issues, which need to be addressed

- The majority review minutes are now written up in timescale, however in a quarter of cases audited (30) these are on case notes due to system issues which are being addressed.
- Child participation – although in most cases the child's views were presented to the review, older children were choosing not to attend the meetings and this is an area for development.
- 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.

- Care Plans since the introduction of the new format, have significantly improved, plans are more focussed. More could still be done to individualise the plans and bring out the individual child needs.

9. Progress in respect of the IRO Service objectives in: 2018 - 2019

1. Implement IRO review minutes tracker and ensure all reviews are on the system within 20 working days of the meeting

Progress – this has been implemented and performance has reached 100%

2. Complete workshop with IROs and team managers on improving the quality CLA reviews

Progress - Practice workshops have been delivered throughout the year and a project has been completed to improve the templates for reports and plans on the LCS Children Recording system which have been redesigned and implemented. This has made a clear impact and the plans are now easy to follow, more work will be needed to improve the quality and ensuring that plans reflect the unique nature of the child's need, however the new plans represent a step change from previous practice. Further development work is planned for July 2019.

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%

Progress – The Child Participation Officer was commissioned and has been appointed in May 2019. The Participation officer is now working with the IRO's to improve participation.

4. Introduce compliance audit of all CLA reviews to monitor and ensure minimum practice standards

Progress - This was implemented on the 1st of July 2018 and has now been revised and version 2 will be implemented in July 2019. These have been presented to the monthly performance meetings and have been used to inform quarterly performance meetings. The challenge has been given to the CLA service and IRO to work together to improve: Children's Participation, Social Worker reports to reviews and the commissioning of initial health assessments.

5. Review the dispute resolution procedure and tracking mechanism

Progress - This was completed and implemented on 1st of August 2018 and will be revised in August 2019. The impact so far has been to reduce the number of formal disputes being raised, and to narrow their focus onto the quality of the care planning. This has been positive as it has shifted the focus of the IRO's onto issues affecting outcomes for children, rather than just focussing on gaps in process. These are important but covered by the compliance checklist.

6. Redesign of consultation and feedback forms and also to look at the possibility of using different communication methods such as texting or the Mind of My Own app.

Progress - The Mind of My Own App has been commissioned and implemented across the whole of children's services and will go live in June 2019.

7. Develop and implement – midpoint reviews for all children looked after by December 2018

Progress – Midpoint Reviews have now been implemented though there has been a delay in getting these underway and the IRO's have only begun consistently completing midpoint reviews since February of 2019.

10. IRO Service objectives in: 2019 -2020

1. **Work with the Children's Participation Officer and Children in Care Council to improve the participation of child and young people in reviews**
2. **Review the Dispute Resolution Process to ensure that IRO's are maximising their impact on improving outcomes for children and young people**
3. **Continue to embed and learn from the implementation of Mind of My Own as a communication tool**
4. **Continue to improve the quality of children in care plans and pathway plans through joint training and working, with some focus on planning towards transitions and re-unification.**
5. **Develop the use of the Signs Of Safety/Signs Of Success model within the IRO service**
6. **Review the impact of compliance checklists and use them to improve culture around preparation for reviews**
7. **Develop the role of IRO with regard to the Public Law Outline work (PLO) and Permanency Planning Processes**
8. **Develop the child focus of reviews**
9. **Review the reasons for Black/Black British children coming into care alongside the quality of services to meet their needs.**
10. **Develop a form for Midpoint Reviews on LCS to improve tracking and consistency**