

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

ANNUAL REPORT

01 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

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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 (IRO Handbook 2010) for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Where possible, this Report refers to Children Looked After (CLA) which reflects the views and wishes of children and young people in Thurrock 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 01 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

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

4.1 As a Corporate Parent, the Council is ambitious to ensure that children achieve the best possible outcomes while in the care of the authority. We aim wherever possible for children to be cared for either within their own family or wider networks. However, when it is felt that this is not a safe or suitable option for all efforts are made to find children 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 2022/23, staffing within the IRO services has remained stable. There have been no periods of prolonged absence or sickness or changes to staffing. The service continues to comprise of five, permanent full-time members of staff.

5.2 All five IROs working for the Service are qualified Social Workers registered with Social Work England and subject to regular Disclosure and Barring Service enhanced checks. All have relevant and appropriate skills, bringing to the role specialist knowledge and experience.

5.3 There are two female and three male IRO's and the IRO's come from diverse backgrounds, ensuring young people in our care can be allocated to IRO's across a range of diverse groups.

5.4 All five of the IROs act independently 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 There have been no complaints received about the IRO service and conduct of the CLA reviews.

6. IRO Caseload and Service Performance

6.1 IRO caseloads

	2018/19	2019/2020	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Average caseload	62	60	60	59	60
Caseload range	44-68	57-62	58-61	57-61	59-62

6.2 The average IRO caseload been consistent in the past five years with a caseload average in 2022/23 of 60 children and young people. This is in line with the IRO handbook which states that an average IRO caseload should be between 50 - 70 children and young people for a full-time post. Children and young people's

circumstance and situations vary in complexity, and 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.

- 6.3 IRO's may also have additional responsibilities which are shared amongst the team in addition to chairing reviews, such as sitting on, and advising on panel and supporting the delivery of training.

7. Number of Child and Young Person in Care Reviews

	2022									2023			Year to Date
Due in month	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Total held	58	99	44	63	39	74	84	71	63	64	63	78	800
Total held in timescale	55	95	44	63	39	73	84	71	63	64	62	77	790
Percentage of total held in timescale	94.8%	96%	100%	100%	100%	98.6%	100%	100%	100%	100%	98.4%	98.7%	98.8%
Held In quarter	201			176			218			205			800
Percentage held in timescale	96.5			99.4%			100%			99.0%			Average 98.7%

During the performance year April 2022 – March 2023, the IRO service conducted a total of eight hundred reviews. This is a decrease of 133 (a decrease of 14.25%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. This reduction can be accounted for by fewer children in care as well as a lower percentage of children experiencing placement moves during this period. Additionally during the period 2021/22 the frequency of reviews may have increased to ensure robust oversight of the plans for children and young people coming out of Lockdown. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, remained consistent with the previous year, with the final average being 98.7% of reviews held within timescales.

The high performance in this area is due to the work of the whole team including Business Support as well as the IRO's in ensuring that reviews are held within timescales. Reviews are booked at five months to accommodate any unforeseen issues, such as availability of care plans or changes within family requirements (such as parental issues in attending the review) that arise or the need to change the date of a review to meet the needs and requirements of the child or young person.

7.1 Children and Young People's Participation in Reviews

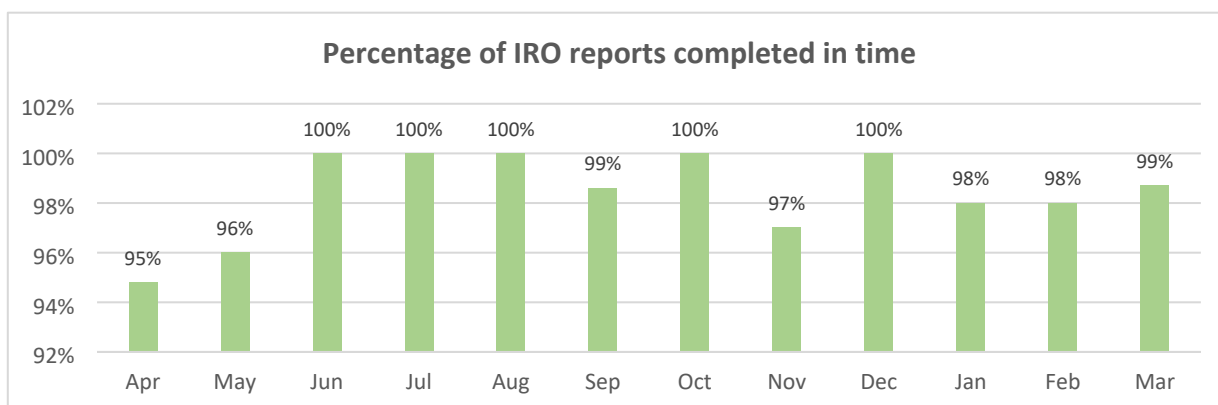
Ensuring that each review fully represents the views of the child is central to the review process and that the views of the child inform the adults around them with regards to their care planning. The IRO service works extensively to build relationships with children and young people to encourage their participation in the review process. During the reporting period there were only six instances where children did not attend or send views for their review this represents 0.84% of the total reviews held for children over the age of 4. Children attended and spoke for themselves in 55.4% of their reviews, an increase of 1% when compared to last year. All Looked After Children and young people over the age of four are offered access to the advocacy service.

C & YP Participation in Reviews	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Child aged under four	142	151	131	92
Child attended and spoke	439	459	471	443
Child attended - advocate spoke	10	0	3	0
Child attended & gave non-verbal views	0	0	2	1
Child attended without contributing	14	10	6	6
Child did not attend, advocate briefed	59	20	12	8
Child did not attend, views sent	163	209	242	244
Child did not attend, no views sent	40	15	15	6
No participation recorded	0	0	0	0
Total	867	864	882	800

Whilst children and young people are given the option to attend their meeting, their attendance is not mandatory. There has been an increase in the number of children and young people who chose not to attend their review but rather send their views via other means. The IRO service continues to look at creative ways to gather the views of children and young people in a meaningful way. This involves offering children several ways to share their views in a manner that suits them. Whilst most children are keen to see their IRO face to face, there has been an increase (particularly with older young people) for their IRO to contact them over TEAMS on a video call. There remains an appetite for IRO's to engage with children and young people in more creative ways, utilising all resources available to them.

The IROs ensure that both parents, where possible, are consulted and invited to the review. The parent's views are considered in the review meeting, and they receive a copy of the record, where appropriate.

7.2 Completion of Review Reports between March 22 to April 23.



On completion of the child's review the IRO is expected to complete a report on the child's electronic file. The report provides a note of the review and its discussions, and the recommendation made in the review. There is an expectation that review outcome reports are completed and distributed to young people, parents, and professionals within 20 working days of the review.

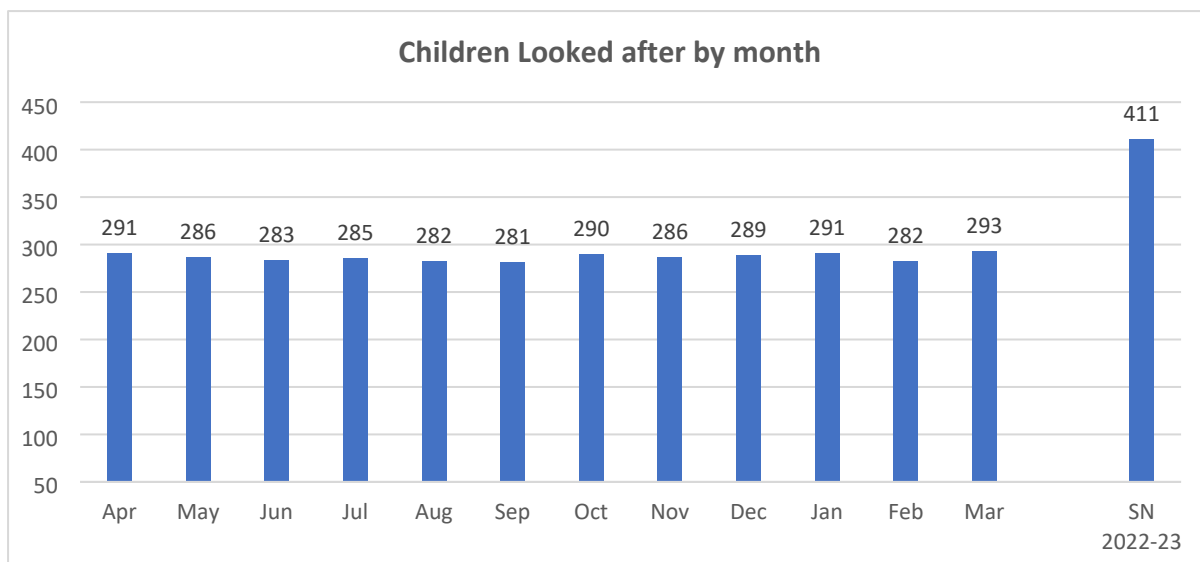
The number of reviews completed within timescale for the period April 2022 March 2023 range between 95 - 100% and on average 98.5% of reports were completed within timescale. Delays in the provision of reports is usually due to issues with the recording processes. Timeliness of reports is regularly scrutinised by the service manager and where appropriate issues of late reports are brought to the attention of the IRO and acted on as a priority.

The review process is supported by an efficient and professional business support unit and the IROs ensure that they visit or speak to children/ young people and will discuss how they experienced the review meeting and how/where they would like it conducted.

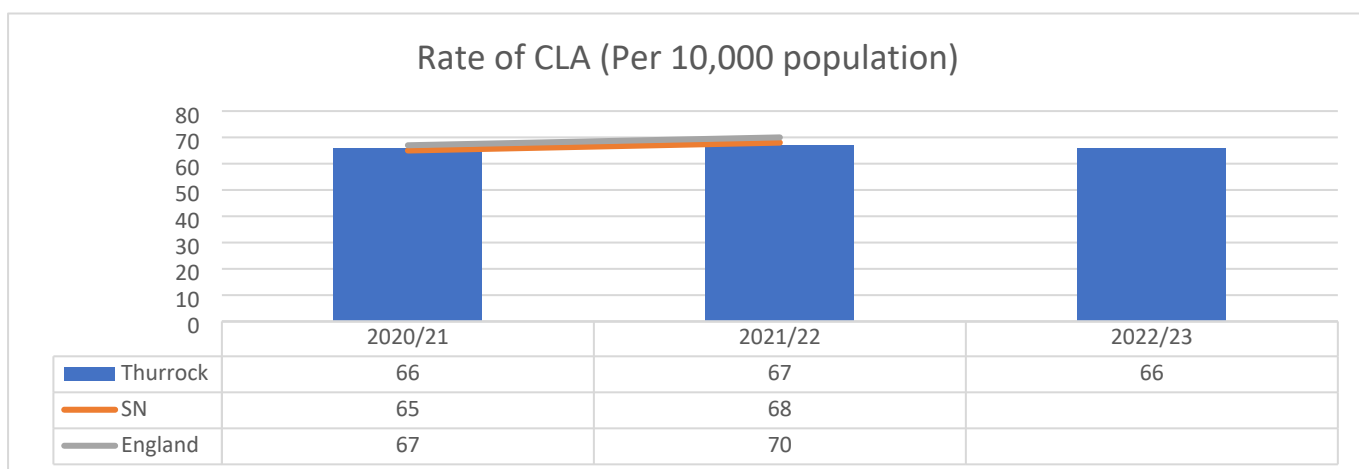
8. Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

8.1 Numbers of Children in Care

Thurrock's number of children looked after is at the lower end of the statistical neighbour average. The monthly breakdown for the numbers of children looked after has remained stable and consistent throughout the year ranging between 281 and 293, this range is lower than the figures for previous year (294 to 308).

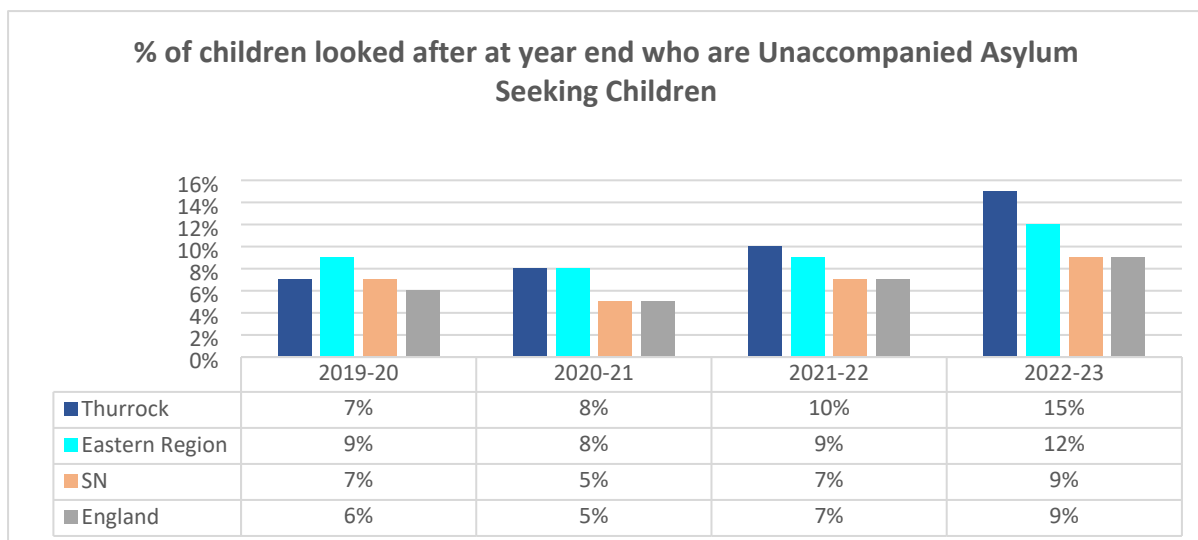


The rate of Children Looked After at the end of March 2023 per 10,000 of the child population was 66 which is in line with statistical neighbour at 68 and slightly below the figures nationally at 70 per 10,000(2021/22). (National comparative data for 2022-23 for rates is not available as the DfE will publish when ONS to provide revised mid-year population estimates)



Year	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Total cohort	293	298	298	294	293
Number of UASC	30	20	24	28	45

The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children rose by seventeen young people at the end of March 2023 this increase represents quotas set by national government in August 2022. This represents 15.3% of the total cohort of children and young people accommodated.



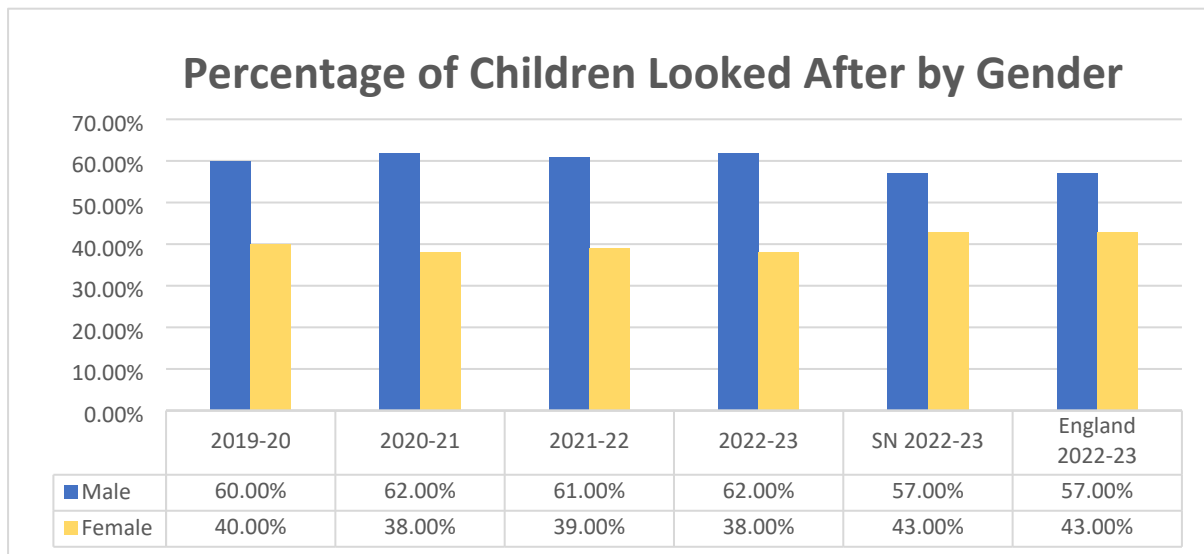
The percentage of children classed as UASC as a percentage of the CLA population at the end of 2022-23 is higher than figures for the Eastern Region, Statistical Neighbours and the rest of the country. The current quota for UASC is 0.1% of the general child population in Thurrock (44 children). There are times due to Thurrock being a port of entry for children seeking asylum this number is exceeded with UASC registering in Thurrock before being moved to another Local Authority.

Adoption figures have risen by 5 children during the reporting period, a 62.5% increase on last year. This increase is due to a backlog of cases held up in the legal system either due to the impact of Covid or legal challenge from parents.

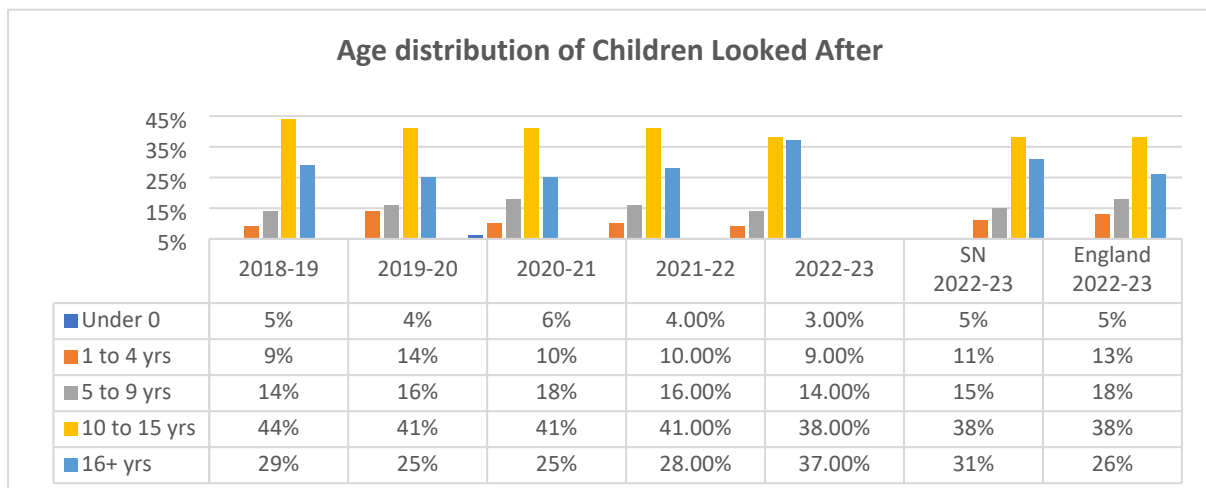
Year	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Total cohort	293	298	298	294	293
Adopted	13	14	8	8	13

Whilst the national picture for adoptions is somewhat mixed the spike seen by Thurrock is similar to that experienced by Essex and Southend both of whom use the same Court system. Every effort is made to secure permanent accommodation for children and continued scrutiny is provided by the IRO service to see whether any delay is avoidable.

8.2 Gender of Children and Young People in Care

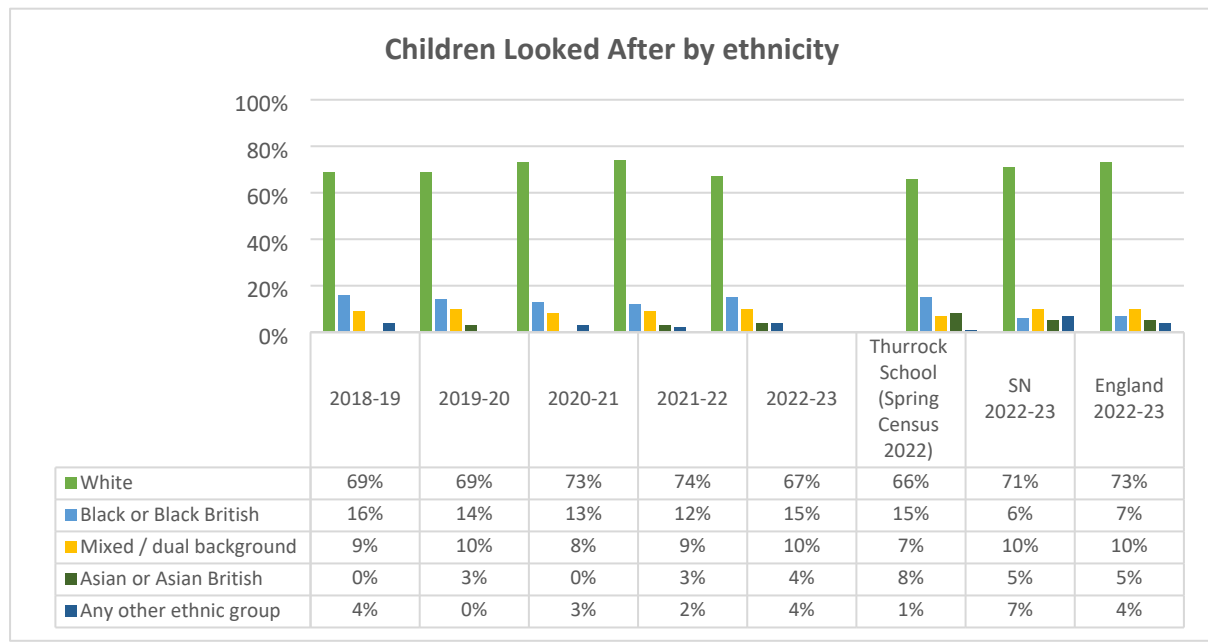


The number of males in care continues to exceed the number of females. Figures for 2022/23 show a 1% increase in the number of males to 62% with a similar decrease for females to 38%. The percentage of males accommodated in Thurrock is higher than percentages for statistical neighbours and the rest of the country, this is due to the number of UASC, the majority of whom are male and at the end of March were 15.% of our total CLA figure, 6% higher than statistical neighbours and the rest of the country.



The age distribution of children looked after continues to see young people in the 12 to 15-year-old age bracket represent the largest proportion of the total cohort. There has been a significant increase in the percentage of children aged 16 plus (9%). This is due to a sizeable number of children turning sixteen within the year and is reflective of the data from 2018/19 to 2021/22 where children aged 10 to 15 repeatedly represented the largest category and would account for the difference in the figures for statistical neighbours as well as the rest of the country.

8.3 Ethnicity of Children and Young People in Care



Identity is a core factor considered within the dimensions on developmental need (Care Planning Guidance 2015). This 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 they are and their heritage, and to understand, as far as they are able, why they are 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.

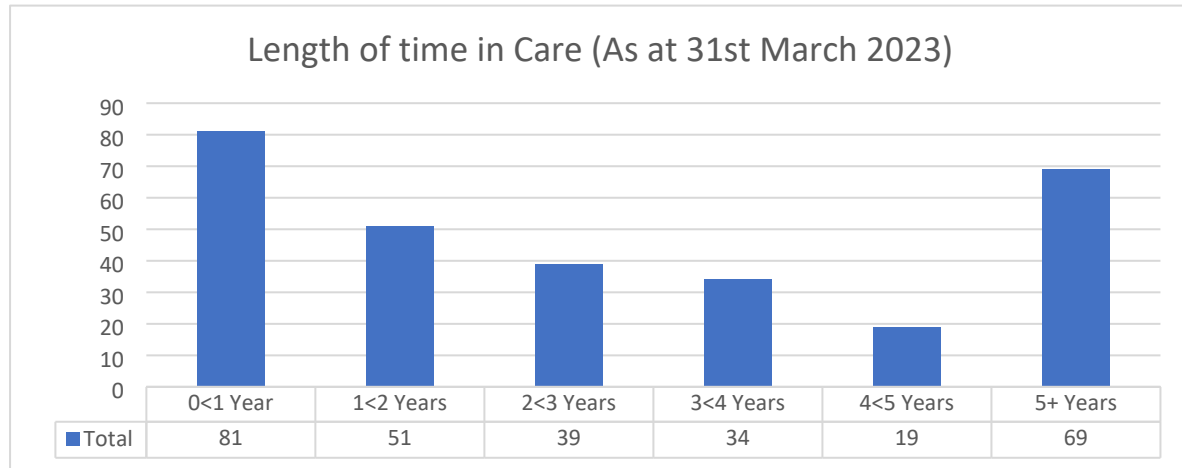
Racial and cultural identity is an important aspect of identity for many Children Looked After. The assessment of each individual child’s needs alongside the child’s own views will determine the actions which should be put into the care plan to ensure that they are able to develop a strong sense of identity and self-esteem.

The recorded information regarding the demographics of the ethnicity of children and young people Looked After has shown that children who are recorded to come from a “White” background continue to represent vast majority of children looked after (67%) however this has decreased by 7% from last year. There have been increases in the percentages of children from all other backgrounds with children from Black or Black British representing the next largest cohort.

The percentages of Children from White and Black or Black British backgrounds represent the largest cohort of Looked after children and young people, however this is in line with the Thurrock School Census (2022). The percentages of children from a Dual/Mixed background are higher than the school census however is in line with statistical neighbours. The increase in Asian or Asian British or any other ethnic background may be due to increases in the numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

The differences in the data for statistical neighbours as well as the rest of the country in representative of the diverse communities within Thurrock and is in line with the census for our area.

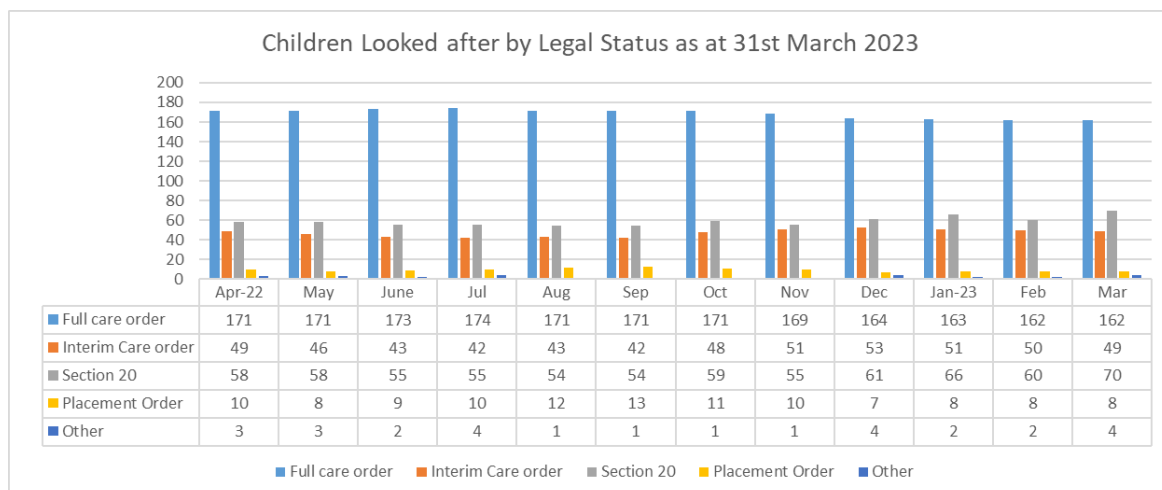
8.4 Time in Care for Children and Young People



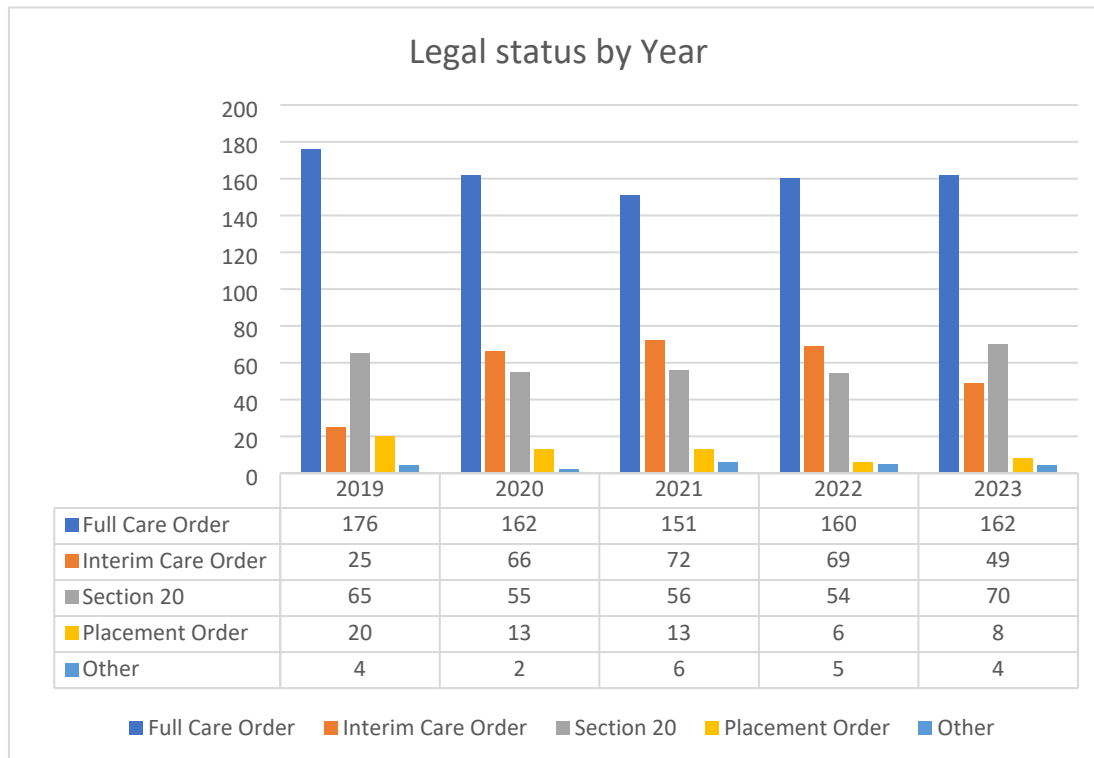
It is recognised that the best place for children is within the care of their families if this is safe. The longer that children remain in care the more problematic it becomes for them to return to the care of their families. It is therefore important that the IRO service continue to scrutinise the care plans that are put in place for children and young people to ensure that planning does not drift and that children do not remain in care for any longer than is necessary.

Sometimes it is not suitable for a child or young person to return home resulting in children remaining in care for longer periods of time. IRO’s closely scrutinise the care plan that has been developed for the young person and explore whether there are more appropriate ways of ensuring permanency for a young person, working with foster carers to explore the possibility of an SGO where children have been in placement for a long time.

8.5 Legal Framework for Children in Care



Data for Thurrock shows 74.9% of children were cared for under a Care Order, 55.5% under a Full Care Order, 16.7% on an Interim Care Order and 2.7% on a Placement Order. The majority of Children Looked After by Thurrock are, or have been, 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.

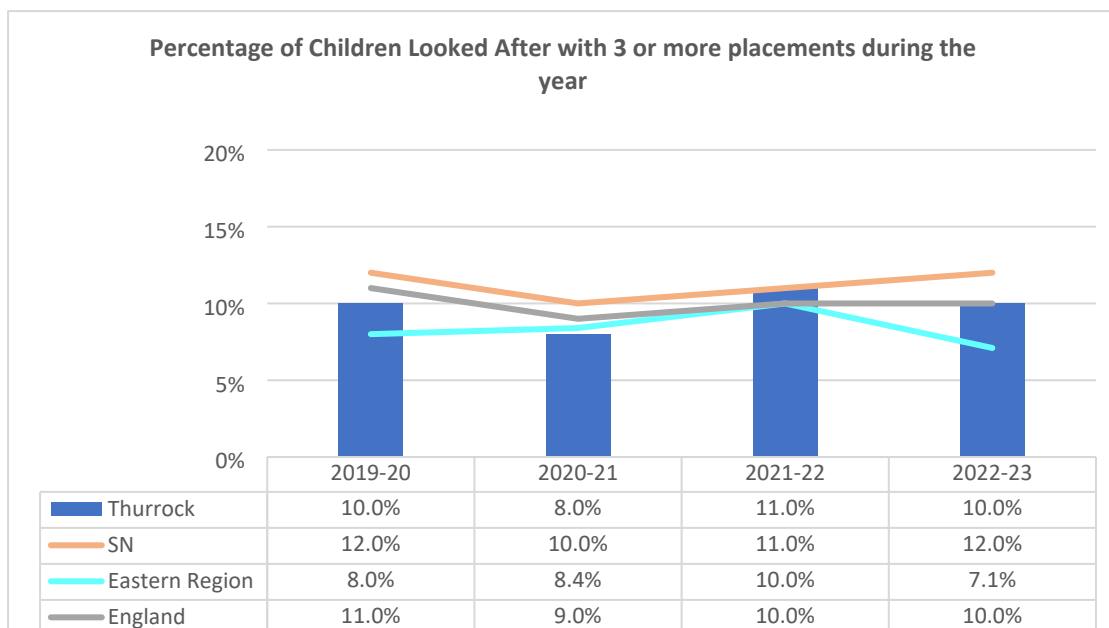


Any intervention that is offered to family's needs to be done so at the earliest possible opportunity that ensures the safety of the child or young person. The increase in Section 20 agreements to its highest levels since 2019 could be due to the increase in the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children who are accommodated under S20 because of their status.

The threshold that must be crossed for a Full or Interim Care Order to be granted is contained within S31 of the Children Act. The Court may grant an Interim Care Order if it has reasonable grounds to believe that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, or a Full Cre Order if the child is, or is continuing to suffer significant harm. This harm must be due to the care being provided to the child by his parents, or because the child is beyond parental control.

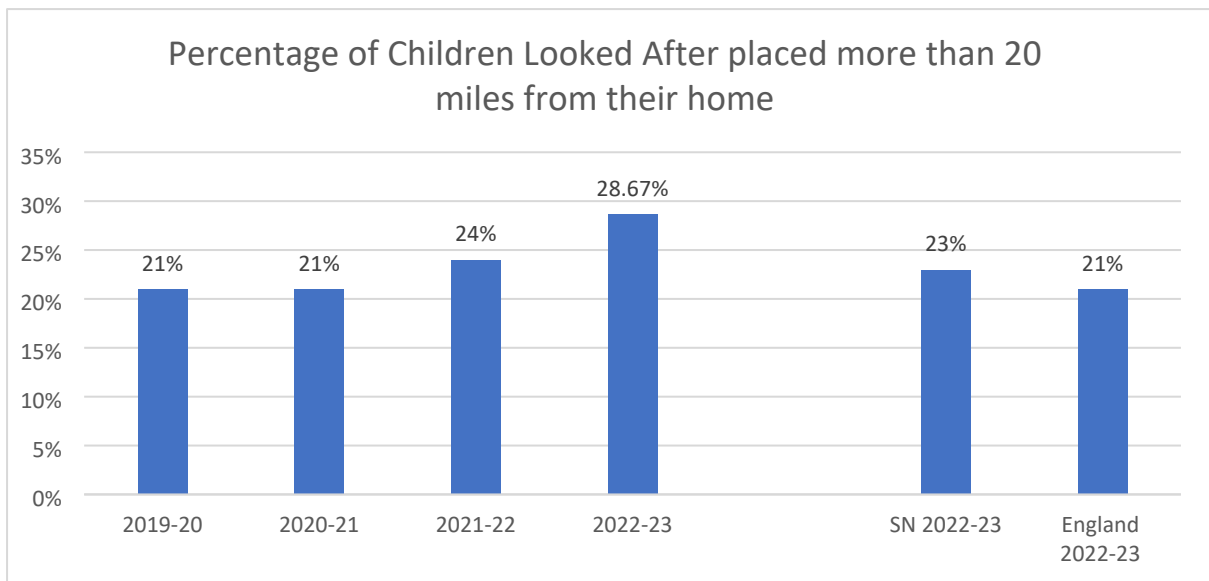
The challenge for the IRO service continues to be one that ensures that the plans that are developed for children are carried out within reasonable time scales and that the legal framework that children are placed under does not have an impact upon the stability that is required to allow them to achieve successful outcomes.

8.6 Placement Stability of Children and Young People in Care



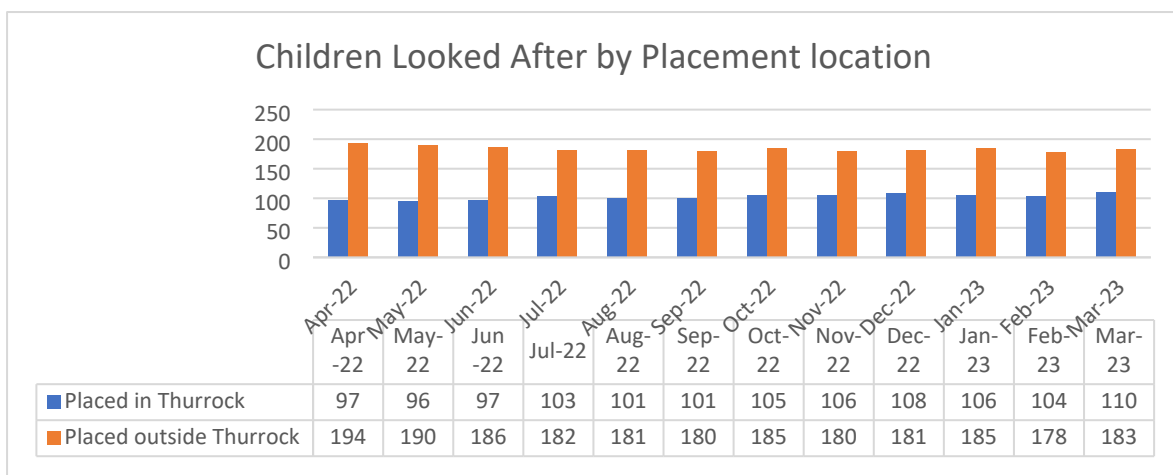
The percentage of children who have had three or more placements in the year 2022 to 2023 has decreased by 1%. The data for statistical neighbours saw a 1% increase, whilst national data saw no change. Wherever possible children need stability to allow them to build positive lasting relationships with the adults around them. Nationally there continues to be a shortage of placements available particularly for children with complex needs. Thurrock is working towards exploring ways to increase the number of placements locally which can meet these needs.

8.7 Placement location of Children and Young People in Care



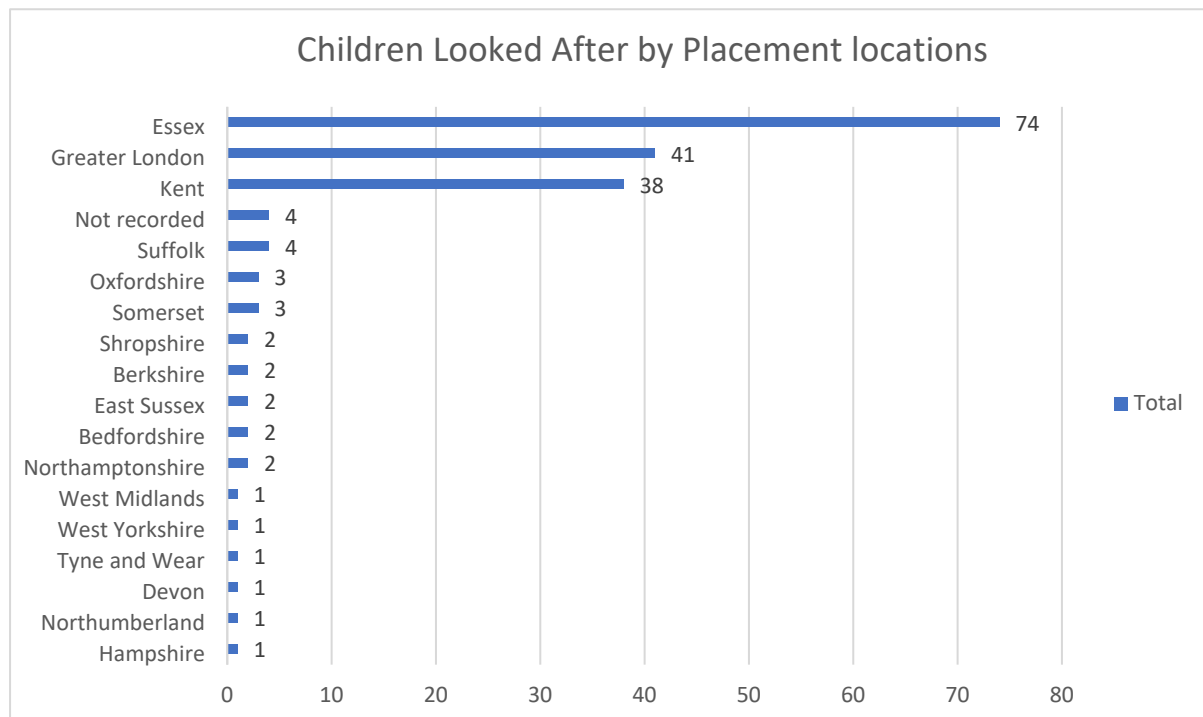
The number of children placed more than 20 miles away from their home has risen by 4.67%. This is higher than the figures for statistical neighbours as well as the rest of the country. The service recognises the need for every effort to be made to place children as close to their home as possible so far is consistent with the need to be safeguarded as well as to ensure that they have continued access to specialist therapeutic services what education provision.

Thurrock has a number of children who require specialist interventions and services, consideration needs to be given to the number of available services within Thurrock that have the capacity to meet these complex needs and requirements of these children as well as the need for some of these young people to be placed a significant distance away from Thurrock to ensure their safety and continued development combined with a national shortage of placements resulting in fewer options available to the service.



Whilst the IRO service recognises that children need to remain in the local area surrounded by familiarity, however this is not always possible and placements outside of the local area need to be sourced. Thought needs to be given not only to location

but also the needs of the individual child in order to ensure that each placement meets the needs and the safety of the child and young person.

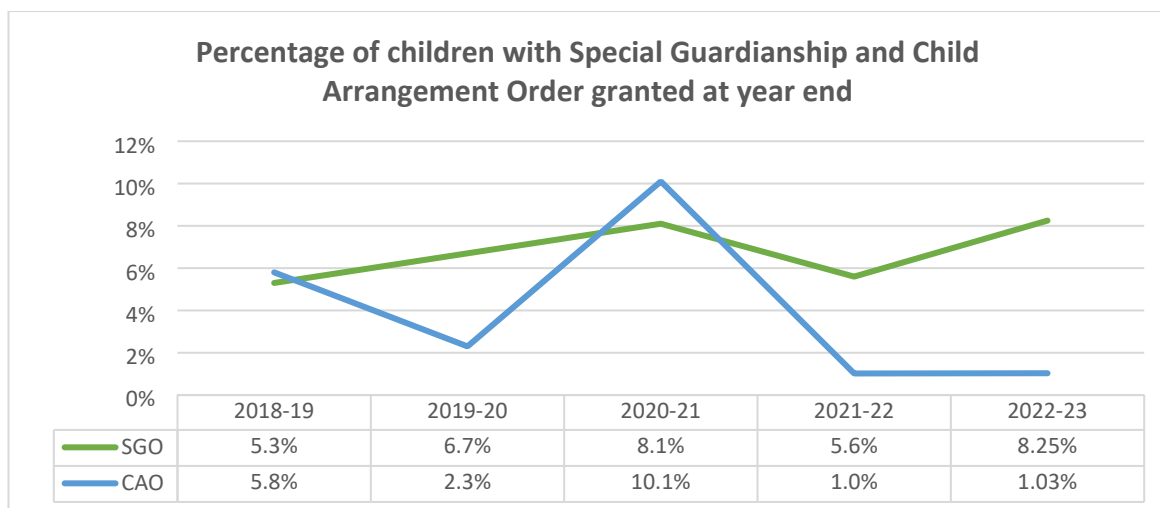


If a child or young person has to be placed outside of Thurrock then every effort is made to find a placement as close to home as is possible. Therefore most children and young people who are not placed within Thurrock are placed within Essex, Greater London, and Kent. There are times that a specialist placement is required either due to specific need or to ensure the child's safety and often these can be a distance from Thurrock.

9. Use of Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is an order appointing one or more individual 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.

SGO is a more secure order than a Child Arrangements Order (CAO) because a person with Parental Responsibility cannot make an application to discharge an SGO unless they have the permission of the court to do so. Also, Special Guardians can make all day-to-day decisions, except for the child leaving the country, without the agreement of others with Parental Responsibility. However, SGOs are 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 children.



Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders can be used when looking to placing a 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 long-term permanency for children.

8.25% of children had been granted a Special Guardianship Order in 2022/23 an increase of 2.65%, the numbers of children on a Child Arrangement Order have stayed the same.

10. 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.

It is recognised that at times when a dispute is raised it can be viewed being critical of social work practice and decision making and therefore it is encouraged that where possible disputes are resolved informally working alongside services. Thurrock's IRO's manage most disagreements and challenge very effectively and on an informal basis. In most of the cases discussion with social workers and their managers is effective in achieving the progress required.

The IRO will endeavour to ensure that the views of the child and young person are central to every interaction and form the basis of most disputes where the IRO feels that the views of the child have not been heard or properly understood. 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.

The IRO service has worked to build relationships with social work teams and wherever possible resolve disputes at the earliest opportunity at an informal level to avoid disruption and delay for children and young people.

There was one formal disputes during the reporting period Apr 2022 to Mar 2023. This was in relation to the progress of the care plan.

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

11. Feedback from the Children in Care about the IRO Service.

In January 2023 the IRO service developed and introduced the use of a QR code for children and young people to express their views about the IRO service. The information provided from this QR code, whilst limited showed a high level of satisfaction with the IRO service with 100% of children and young people who completed the QR code stating that they had spoken to their IRO before the review, that they felt involved in the review process and that there was nothing that they felt the service could improve the meetings or the support they received from the IRO service. Whilst this is very encouraging, it is hoped that going forwards this QR code will provide more information about how young people view the service and what recommendations they would have to improve it.

Children and young people are continually encouraged to make use of the Mind of My Own App to share their views and feelings and the IRO's provide children and young people with their contact numbers and emails. Prior to every review contact is made with the child or young person either face to face or via mobile phone or the relevant app.

12. IRO Service objectives in: 2022-2023

To contribute proactively to the transitions process for children and young people on the verge of leaving care.

The IRO service routinely reviews the transition planning for all young people aged over 15 ½ years old. The IRO service has worked with personal advisors within Childrens Services to make sure that they fully understand the transitions process and what is required. The IRO service has also worked with the Leaving Care Service to offer all children a further review after their 18th birthday to ensure that plans agreed prior to their 18th birthday have been carried out or escalated as appropriate.

The IRO will improve representation and participation of service users at CLA Review meetings. The IRO will collect feedback from service users about their CLA Review experience to help improve the CLA Review meetings.

As mentioned above the IRO service has recently implemented a QR code that is attached to the review correspondence provided to young people. It is hoped that analysis of this information in the coming year will allow for the service to be more responsive to the understanding the experience of young people.

To ensure that there is no delay in the plans for children with regards to long-term linking.

There are discussions within the Review where any child has been in Foster Care for more than a year if long-term linking is a plan that can be pursued. The IRO service will ensure that there are clear timescales for this to be completed and that this is checked at the midway reviews and provide the views of the IRO in a timely manner.

IRO service to strategically support and where necessary challenge & help the CLA service prepare care plans and review reports on time.

It is important that children, young people, and their families are clear about the plans that they Local Authority has for them and that they can take part in any meetings in an informed manner by having all the information prior to the meeting. Whilst the IRO service recognises the significant pressures upon frontline teams, it is felt that this is a basic requirement of the review process and as such where care plans and review reports are not provided on time the IRO service will look to challenge this with the allocated worker and the team manager. Emails are sent monthly alerting team managers and service managers about any upcoming reviews so that the relevant checks and balances are put in place. On the rare occasion that there is no care plan or reports every effort is made to minimise the impact and disruption upon the child or young person, either by holding the review in two parts or seeking another date in the near future. Feedback from the IRO service is that in the main social workers are ensuring that there is a plan available for discussion at the point of the review being held.

To take an active role in the provision of training to raise awareness of the role and remit of the IRO.

The IRO service will explore avenues to make practitioners more aware of the role of the IRO in terms of the Quality Assurance aspect of the position. A request has been made to be included in the induction programme for new starters and the IRO service will continue to build relationships with practitioners by being linked with service areas. It is felt that this is an ongoing goal due to changes within the Childrens Services workforce.

13. IRO Service Objectives 2023-2024

To complete the Recommendations from the Review within five working days to comply with the requirements of the IRO handbook.

The IRO needs to work collaboratively with front line services to ensure that the threshold for raising a dispute is consistent across the service.

The IRO service will continue to work alongside frontline teams to develop a clear and consistent offer with regards to service and financial provision to Looked After children and young people as well as Care Leavers.

To continue to build on the relationships with the social work teams and take an active role ensuring that the social workers are aware of the role of the IRO and the Review process.

To continue to provide minutes and reports to children and young people that are meaningful and age appropriate.

To explore the use of family network meetings to support young people moving home or turning 18.