



Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service

**Annual Report
April 2023 – March 2024**

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Annual Report BCP Council - IRO Service.

April 2023 to March 2024

1. Introduction

The purpose of this annual report is to provide an account of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service between 1 April 2023 and the 31 March 2024. This report analyses and evaluates practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children and the effectiveness of the IRO service in ensuring the local authority, as a corporate parent, meets its statutory responsibilities towards looked after children and care experienced young people.

2. Purpose of Service and Legal Context

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) were nationally introduced to represent the interests of looked after children. Their role was strengthened through the introduction of statutory guidance in April 2011. The IRO service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, Department for Children, Schools, and Families (2010) and linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011.

This report identifies good practice as well as highlighting areas for development in relation to the BCP IRO functioning, and its impact upon outcomes for children. The IRO has a key and statutory role in relation to the improvement of care planning for looked after children. The responsibility of the IRO is to have an overview of the child's care planning arrangements in respect of the child's wellbeing in placement, and plans for the future, as well as oversight of the child's health and educational needs. The IRO will offer constructive and targeted scrutiny and challenge regarding case management through regular statutory monitoring and follow up between children's review periods.

The IRO service is located within the quality, performance, improvement, and governance directorate and are independent of social work teams and their operational line management. A collaborative approach is in place between the IRO service, social work colleagues and partner agencies. A high challenge/high support approach is adopted by the service, with the expectation that all agencies are aspirational for the children that we work with.

3. BCP Council as Corporate Parents

Officers and Councillors of BCP council have a duty to ensure the needs of all children and young people who are in care or who are care experienced are met.

The Corporate Parenting Board strives to hold to account all departments within the council who also have a duty to these children and young people. The IRO service manager attends the quarterly corporate parenting boards. A key responsibility of the IRO service is to monitor the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent.

These responsibilities for local authorities were first laid out in the Children Act 1989, the Children Act 2004 and reinforced in the Children and Young People's Act 2008 and most recently in the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The most recent legislation sets out seven Corporate Parenting principles that all councils must adhere to for children in care and care experienced young people, to ensure that their needs are met, and life chances promoted. All local authorities in England must, in carrying out functions in relation to Looked After Children, have regard to the 7 principles of corporate parenting:

- to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people.
- to encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings.
- to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people.
- to help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners.
- to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people.
- for those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work.
- to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

BCP has a Corporate Parenting Board that is well attended by young people, elected members and council officers. Issues raised by young people at the meeting set the agenda for service improvements. Young people who attend the panel are well versed in their role on the board and are supported by participation officers to ensure their voice and the voice of other children and young people is heard.

4. Profile of the IRO Service

The IRO service continues to serve all children and young people living in the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole areas as well as any child or young person who is looked after by BCP children's services, who is placed in other parts of the UK.

The IRO service has moved on significantly throughout this reporting period. Standards of practice continue to improve, and IRO impact is more visible and measurable. Our team is one that is unified and aspirational for the children and young people who we work with and on behalf of. Management foster collaborative working with IROs, children/young people and their families, and other professionals which has helped to create our service improvement and development plan.

The current establishment is 15 full time and two part time IRO/CP chairs. Our current ratio of permanent to agency staff is 11:6. Two permanent members of staff are due to start at the end of April and one at the beginning of May 2024 which will reduce agency staffing numbers further. Currently, we have one permanent team manager (covering children in care work) and one agency team manager (covering child protection work). A permanent child protection team manager has been appointed and will start on the 20th of May 2024.

There are 4 male and 13 female IRO/CP chairs. Nine members of staff undertake child in care work, with two carrying child in care and child protection workloads. The rest of the workforce undertake child protection work. Every attempt is made by management to allocate work based on a professional's area of strength. Some of our staff prefer a mixed workload, whilst others prefer to specialise in either child protection or children in care. Whilst we try to allocate work based on practitioners' strengths and preference area of work, the needs of the child and service demand take priority and resources are managed accordingly.

The ethnic and cultural makeup of the team is not a diverse one with all staff being white. Because of this, we are mindful that diversity training needs to be regular and ongoing. Triple P training was undertaken in 2023 which helped our staff to have a better understanding of the challenges unaccompanied minors experience when they arrive in the UK. Diversity is also a standing agenda item in staff meetings which helps us to ensure that good practice and challenges are identified, discussed and addressed, and our service meets the needs of all of the children that we work with.

There are varying degrees of experience within the team, with some staff having extensive knowledge and experience of the IRO role, whilst others are new to the role. This mix is helpful to staff development across the board. Those staff who come with recent front-line experience bring with them knowledge and experience of working more directly with children and families in a front-line team; this can bring about further learning for those members of staff who have been in the IRO role for a significant period of time. Less experienced IROs benefit from those IROs who have been in the role for a significant period of time.

Robust inductions continue to be undertaken with all new staff and a gradual increase in workload is applied. This assists new IROs to embed induction learning, observe other IROs and become familiar with the BCP system, policies and procedures. The IRO team has its own Practice Standards which sets out procedures and the expected standard of work.

5. Staffing and recruitment

Throughout this financial year, the service has had periods of staff stability and successful recruitment campaigns, as well as some unforeseen staffing issues that resulted in a reliance upon agency staff again. Recruitment in the earlier part of the

financial year was good and nine IRO/CP chairs were recruited. Four of these members of staff were agency who converted to permanent. The Team Manager posts have also been successfully recruited to. One team manager, who was an agency manager in the IRO service, has also converted to permanent. The other vacant child protection team manager post has also been recruited to. Service Manager, Head of Service and Service Director has remained the same since January 2022. As of May 2024, we will have a permanent management group.

Towards the latter part of the year, we lost three members of staff unexpectedly which increased the number of agency staff in the team again. Whilst this impacted somewhat upon service delivery, we were able to re-recruit agency staff who had previously worked in the team which helped to reduce disruption for some children.

Recruitment in the latter part of the financial year has been slower. Whilst we continue to receive applications, a large proportion of these applicants do not have the required knowledge and experience. The outstanding decision in respect of pay and reward may also be having an impact upon our recruitment.

The IRO Service has a Business Support Team that consists of three members of staff: one full time and two part time. The team is a stable one and provide good support to the IRO team and management. Monthly meetings are held with the IRO team manager and business support officers (BSO) to look at what is working well and issues that need to be addressed. BSO's have a good grasp of the work that IROs undertake and the timescales that need to be adhered to. When there have been issues due to challenges in the business support team for example a delay in minutes going out, this has been dealt with swiftly between BSO/IRO management.

6. Workload

Workloads in the team have been more stable this financial year. Despite most IROs being at the top end of their capacity, there has been no delays with the allocation of new work. Upon notification of a child or young person becoming looked after, an IRO is allocated within 24 hours of notification.

Only when there have been staffing issues have workloads increased to over what is recommended in the IRO Handbook. This was for a very short period of time until agency staff were recruited which was relatively quickly.

When looking at allocations and workloads, we now need to consider the number of children and young people who are placed out of county and how many out of county children each IRO is responsible for. A recent IRO Service workload audit identified that there was not equity across the team, with some IROs having more children out of county than others. As a result, workload cap needs to be lowered for those IROs who have a high number of children out of county to take into account travel time.

The number of out of county placements has risen considerably in BCP (and nationally) due to suitable placement shortages or a need to keep a child or young person safe due to exploitation.

7. Training, supervision and applying our learning

Learning from Practice Learning Reviews, Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPR) and themed focus reviews is recorded and monitored in all manager and team meetings and actions for the service are tracked to completion. Dip sampling is undertaken to ensure the learning is embedded into practice and is consistent across the team.

Examples of identified learning themes for the IRO team:

- Limited use of the escalation/Dispute Resolution Process (DRP)
- Timeliness of completion of DRPs and impact
- More robust planning and monitoring for those young people who are 16 + particularly those approaching 18
- The use of mid-point meetings to track and monitor case progression
- Child participation
- Recording of visits
- Absence of social work report and care plan prior to CIC meeting

All IROs continue to progress their professional development by attending training which has included training that is specific for their role. The team have attended Triple P training, DRP training and Case Planning and Review training which links to the service development plan and areas of identified learning. Guest speakers are invited to attend team meetings which is a further learning opportunity for our staff. Peer supervision is also monthly and the feedback from this has been positive and has especially benefited less experienced IROs.

Managers and IROs receive monthly supervision. Supervision covers health and wellbeing of the practitioner as well as business matters. Practitioners have strong management support and managers know their staff well. During supervision, managers will discuss with practitioner's areas of strength and development using feedback from children and young people, parents, carers, professionals and sources such as PLRs and PowerBi. In this financial year, supervisions have focused on the use and impact of DRPs and children who do not have an achieved care plan. Participation and visits to children have also been a focus in supervision and the impact of this has been a noticeable increase in the number of children participating in the review process, attending their meetings and being visited by their IRO.

Staff inductions continue to be robust incorporating mandatory as well as role specific training and observations by new staff, of more experienced IROs. New staff are allocated a mentor when they join the team. Feedback from staff at the probationary confirmation meeting which the service manager attends has been very positive regarding inductions. There was consistent feedback from new staff that the pace that work was allocated to them, allowed them the chance to embed their learning into

practice and become familiar with the procedures, legislation and case management system.

Feedback:

Feedback from a CIC Team Manager on the IRO Service

I want to firstly share that I think you have a cohort of IRO's where child centred practice is evident. The way reviews have been adapted to maximise participation for the child is evident. The care, thought, planning, and other factors from IRO's prior to each review is very good. This is the third LA I have worked in, and I very much feel this authority has a far more child-centred approach compared to the others. In my view, your team presents to have a very committed cohort of IRO's! Therefore, please pass on my thanks and gratitude. I very much wish you all the best for the future.

Feedback from a child in care –

Yes I like my social worker, I like all of them including my foster carers supervising social worker and my IRO - nothing to improve all is ok as it is. 10/10 - couldn't improve

Feedback from a parent–

On a personal note, I'm very happy that James has you as his IRO and I feel you have been incredibly supportive of us as a family and of James.

Feedback from a child in care

I don't want anyone else to be my IRO as I don't like changes. I like when my IRO visits and he is fun, because he knows what's important and I trust him.

Learning from observations

Annual observations are undertaken with all staff and form part of the induction process for new staff.

In three observations that were undertaken with new staff post induction, it was evident that the induction training had had an impact upon their practice and had been pitched at the appropriate level. Whilst the practitioners were experienced social workers with two having a Cafcass background, all of them were new to the IRO role.

In two out of the three reviews held, the child and young person attended and was able to share their views in the meeting with the assistance of the IRO. All three IROs had met with the children and young person prior to their meeting and obtained their views which were shared at the meeting by the IRO. All of the meetings were structured and child focused. It was noted that the review recommendations for one child were SMART.

The learning from the observations was that advocacy was noted to have been discussed with one young person only. For one child, not all the review recommendations outlined verbally during the meeting, were captured in the minutes. One IRO had not completed the letter to the child within the 20-day timescale and recommendations had not been sent to the social work manager within 5 days of the meeting.

Whilst there was learning for the IROs who were relatively new in role at the time the observations took place, the learning was more around process and recording. The outcome of the meetings was in line with the child's needs which considered the views of the child, parents and other professionals involved. More reassuringly, the observations evidenced that the IRO work was child centred and had impact.

Working with social work teams

Each of the social work service areas has an allocated link IRO who works with social work teams to address any low-level concerns around process and practice. A development day for IROs and social workers has been planned to take place later in 2024.

The current area of focus between the IRO service and social work teams is to increase the number of child in care meetings that have both a social work report and care plan prior to the CIC meeting taking place. The number of meetings taking place currently without a social work report and/or care plan is too high. Our data shows that at the end of quarter 4, 85% of children and young people had an updated care plan. Whilst there has been some improvement in this area, and the data shows that we are within tolerance for the first time this year, this is still below target.

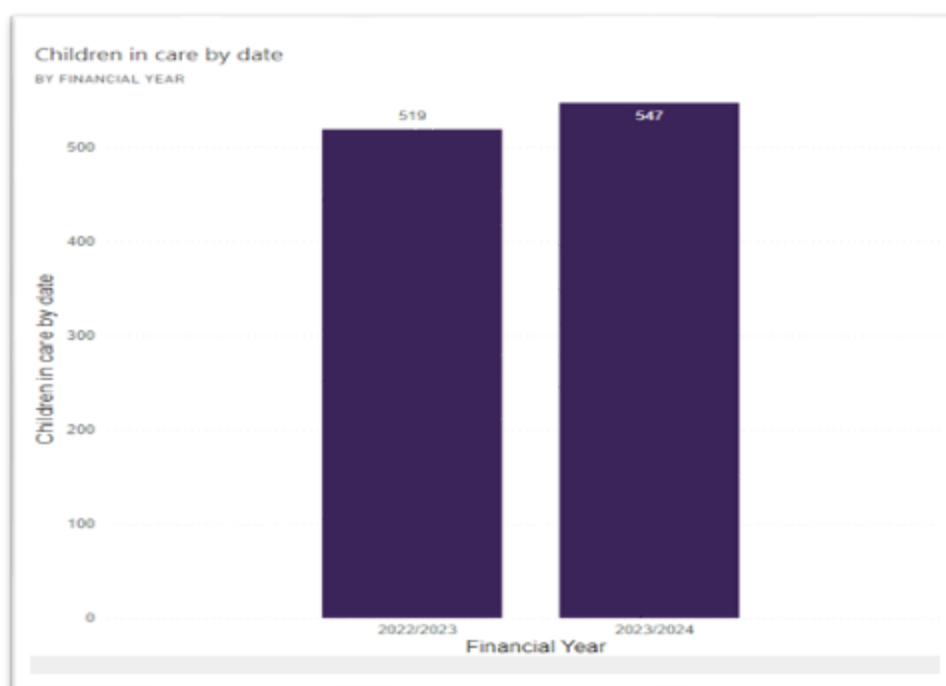
The initial approach undertaken by the IRO Service to improve this was for IROs to postpone the child in care meeting so as the social work report and/or care plan could be completed prior to the review. This had an impact upon the diary capacity of the IROs and other professionals, meaning that some meetings had to be postponed for longer than a week resulting in a three-week delay for some children. More

importantly, children and young people who had been prepared for their meeting to take place on the original date had to be told that it had been postponed which resulted in some children and young people not wishing to take part in the reconvened meeting and losing confidence in the review process.

To avoid the above, a process is now in place whereby the IRO business support team send reminders to social workers 5 and 2 days before a review takes place. The IRO will also follow up with a call to the social worker to remind them. If the paperwork is still not available 24 hours before the meeting, the service manager for the social work team is copied into a final reminder and the meeting will go ahead as planned. After the meeting, the IRO will raise a Cause for Concern notice to the social worker and team manager and requests that the report and/or care plan is updated within 5 days. The IRO will monitor this, and should the documents not be updated; a formal escalation will be raised. This is monitored by the IRO team manager who provides a weekly update to service managers of reviews that have taken place without a social work report and/or care plan.

8. Profile of Looked After Children in BCP Council

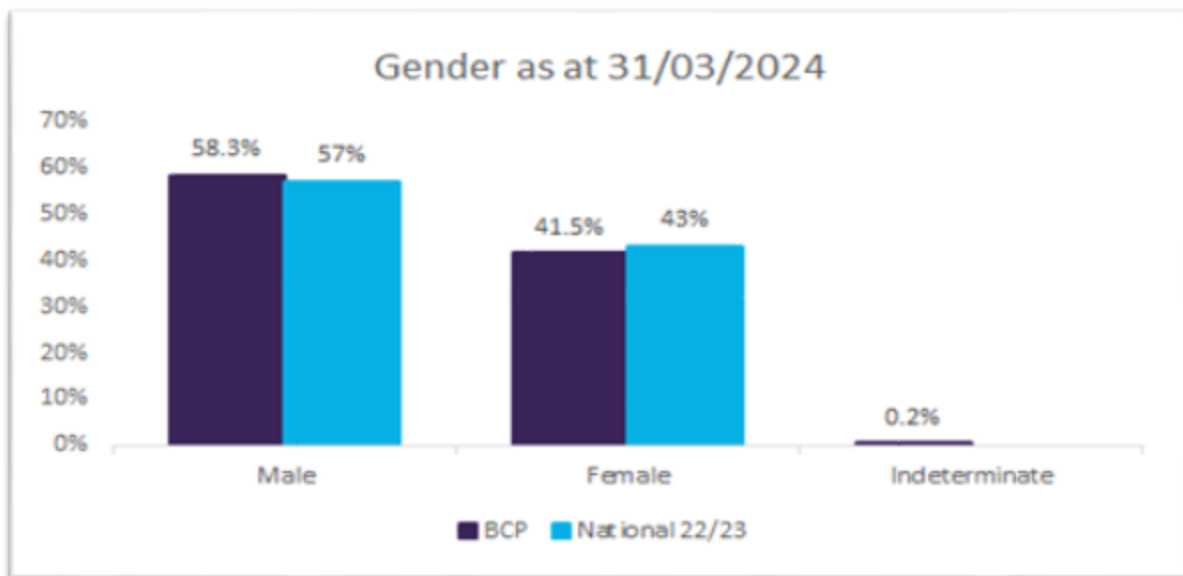
As of the 31 March 2024, there were 547 children and young people in the care of BCP Council. This is a 5% increase from 2022/23 and a 10% increase from 2021/22 which shows a continued upward trend. Of the 547 children in care, 44 were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who make up 8% of the children in care population in BCP.



The rate of children in care in BCP at the end of the financial year was 74 per 10,000 children. This is 3% lower than the national average but 8% higher than regionally and 5% higher than statistical neighbours.

On notification of a child or young person becoming looked after, the IRO Service continues to allocate an IRO within 24 hours of this notification. In times of staffing challenges, the team worked well with managers to maintain children coming into care having an allocated IRO within 24 hours of becoming looked after and the first CIC meeting being convened within 28 days.

The graph below shows the looked after population by gender. There continues to be more males looked after than females. This reporting year, statistics show a 1% decrease in the male population and a 2% increase in the female population of children in care in BCP.



The data below details a breakdown of children and young people who are looked after by age. For children under 1, figures remain the same and in line with all comparators. For children aged between 1 to 4 years old, there has been a 2% increase for this age group, which is lower than all comparators.

For children aged between 5 to 9, there has been a 1% increase in this age group becoming looked after, this is in line with comparators. For children within the age group 10 to 15, there has been a 1% decrease which is slightly lower than comparators.

The number of young people in care aged sixteen and over also decreased by 1% this year meaning that a slight decrease has continued from the previous year. In comparison to national, regional, and statistical neighbour data, BCP figures for this age group of children continue to remain higher than comparators.

CIC as at 31st March	23/24	22/23	2023/24		
	BCP	BCP	National	Stat Neighbour	Regional
% Age: Under 1	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%
% Age: 1 to 4	11%	9%	13%	11%	11%
% Age: 5 to 9	18%	17%	18%	17%	17%
% Age: 10 to 15	37%	38%	38%	39%	40%
% Age: 16 and over	29%	30%	26%	29%	28%

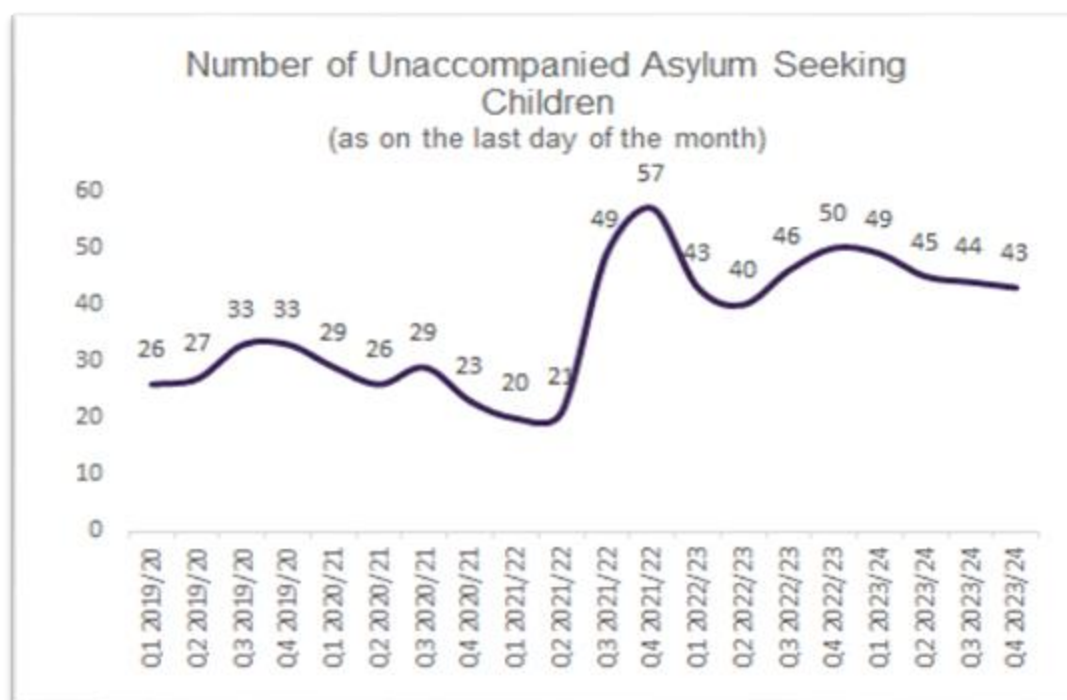
At the end of Quarter 4, 75% of children in care aged under 16 years of age have been in the same placement for at least 2 years. This is a 4% decrease from the previous year but above all comparators.

The number of children who had been in care for over 12 months who have experienced three or more placement moves was 7% at the end of quarter 4. This is a 5% increase from last year but continues to be well below all comparators.

9. Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

The number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children accommodated in BCP Council decreased throughout this financial year. The number of unaccompanied minors in the care of BCP, 4%, is currently lower than the national average, which is 10%, with statistical neighbours being at 11% and regional at 9%.

At the end of this reporting period, there were 43 unaccompanied minors in the care of BCP. This is a 24% decrease from the same time last year. As part of the National Transfer Scheme, all local authorities are expected to have up to a 0.1% population of asylum seeking children per the overall child population in that area. BCP's quota is 74, therefore BCP are currently under quota. Work is being undertaken via the National Transfer Scheme to increase the number of this cohort of children being accommodated in BCP.



10. Ethnicity and Children with Disability

The ethnic profile of children looked after in BCP, reflects the ethnic profile of the child population within BCP. The table below shows that the majority of children and young people who are looked after, continue to be white/British. Children who are of dual heritage are the next largest group who are looked after. There have been no significant changes to the ethnic profile of our looked after children. The data shows that there are some variabilities between BCP data and comparative data; for example those children who are within the 'other ethnic groups', BCP are significantly higher. For black/Black British children, we are lower than our statistical neighbours and regionally.

The number of children with disabilities looked after at the end of this reporting period was 17. This cohort of children make up 3% of the overall looked after children cohort.

IRO workloads continue to be varied. There are no specialist IROs in the team that solely manage UASC or children with disabilities work. We continue to acknowledge that these groups of children have additional and sometimes complex needs and work on the basis that our aspiration for these groups of children is the same for all other children who we work on behalf of. The variation of workload enables our IROs to develop professionally and gain knowledge and experience across all areas of social work.

CIC as of 31st March	23/24	22/23	2022/23		
	BCP	BCP	National	Stat Neighbour	Regional
% White	76%	76%	71%	77%	80%
% Dual heritage	8%	8%	10%	10%	7%
% Asian or Asian British	3%	3%	5%	4%	2%
% Black or Black British	3%	3%	7%	4%	4%
% Other ethnic groups	9%	9%	5%	7%	6%
% Not known	2%	1%	1%	2%	1%

11. Legal status of looked after children in BCP Council

The below table shows the number of children in care by their legal status. The number of children subject of an interim care order is down 3% from the previous year. The data shows us that we are now more in line with our comparators. The number of children subject of a care order in BCP is 3% higher than the previous year but continues to be lower than comparators. The number of children subject of placement orders in BCP continues to be in line with comparators.

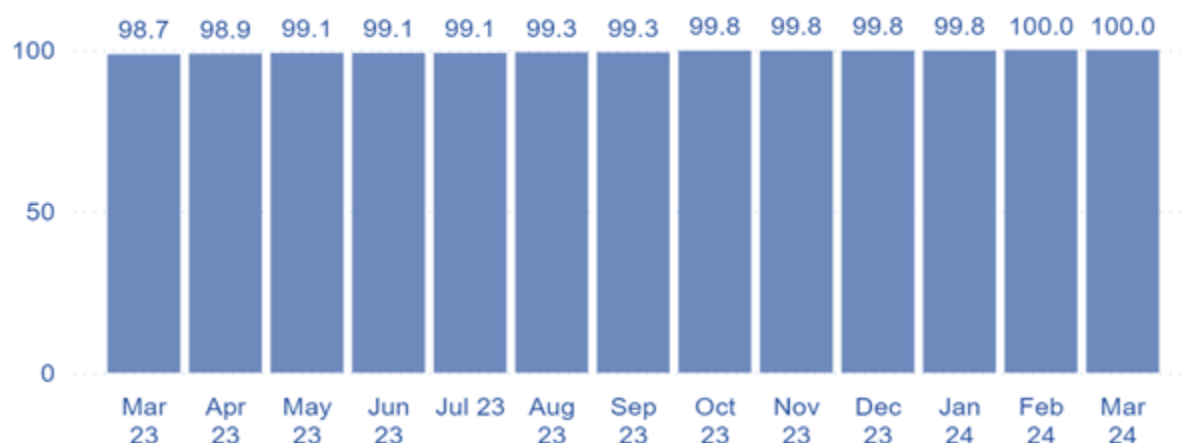
The number of children accommodated under section 20 remains the same as the previous year and remains higher than comparators and this is a continued trend. This is a continued area of focus for the IRO Service.

Children and young people with section 20 status are reviewed within IRO supervision to make sure that their legal status is appropriate and meets their short and long term needs.

CIC as of 31st March	23/24	22/23	22/23		
	BCP	BCP	National	Stat Neighbour	Regional
% Interim care order	19%	22%	19%	18%	18%
% Care order	47%	44%	57%	52%	55%
% Placement order granted	5%	6%	5%	6%	6%
% Accommodated under S20	28%	28%	19%	22%	21%

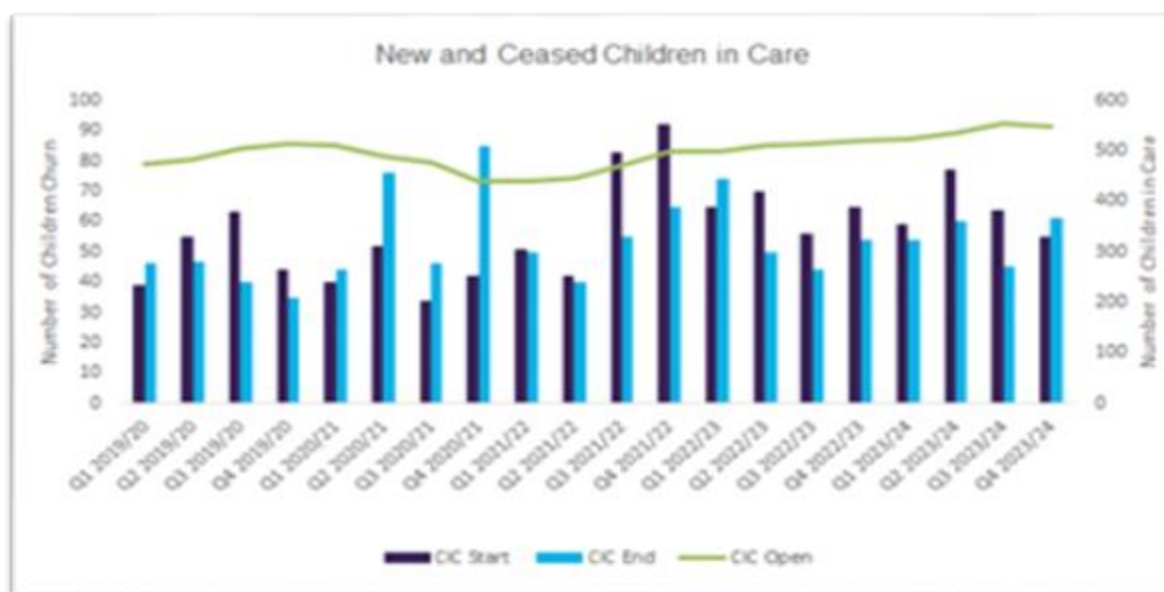
12. Placement type, Permanency and Stability

The IRO service monitors the number of children who have a permanence plan at second review. This is recorded onto the case management system by the IRO via the quality assurance form. There has been a significant improvement in this area compared to last year. Throughout the 2022/23 reporting period, the range in percentage of children who had a permanence plan at second review was between 81% and 86%. In this reporting period, this has increased to between 98 and 100%.



The number of children who had an achieved permanence care plan at the end of this reporting year was low at 43%. This is a continued trend and an area of focus for the IRO service. IRO use of the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) has increased for those children whose permanence plan has not been achieved within nine months of them becoming looked after.

The data below reflects the movement of children in care during the 2023/24 period. In all but quarter 4, there were more children coming into care than being discharged. A Reunification Team has now been established in BCP. The team sits within the Targeted Support Service with the child's allocated social worker having key responsibility for the care plan until reunification has been achieved and the child is no longer looked after or a child in need. BCP's Keeping Families Connected team will also be part of the reunification work.



We know that for some children, their plan of long-term foster care goes unchallenged despite positive changes in a parent's life being made. We need to be more observant of this in the review process and give more consideration to a change of a care plan should it become apparent that a parent or other family member is now able to care for a child or young person who is looked after. The introduction of the Reunification Team will increase the numbers of children returning home where this is appropriate and in line with the child's wishes and feelings.

We have identified that there is still practice in the team that needs to be more robust and challenging of drift and delay. Managers are more aware of this and are taking appropriate steps to address matters on a team and individual basis. A refresher care planning and review training session has been completed with all IROs using case examples.

The use of mid-point reviews is embedded in IRO practice. This assists an IRO to identify drift and delay, or any other issue, part way through the review process and take earlier action. We are starting to see the impact of the midpoint reviews which has led to an increase in the escalation process being used. This is not consistent across the team however and managers are aware of this and addressing as necessary.

Whilst there has been some increased stability in the IRO service and social work teams, this has not been consistent throughout this reporting period, which has impacted upon care planning and achieving permanence. Recruitment across children's services is improving with there now being a 70% permanent to 30% agency staff ratio meaning children and young people experiencing multiple changes in IRO and social worker is less. With stability in the IRO service and social work teams improving, we are confident that, going forward, permanence for our children and young people will be achieved in a timelier manner.

The highest proportion of children in the care of BCP Council are placed with foster families, both in-house and through independent fostering agencies. 65% of children are placed with BCP carers, 30% of children are placed with kinship carers. Due to a system and accuracy of placement codes issue, the data in respect of type of foster placement for 5% of our children is not recorded. 58% of children are long term matched with their carers.

The number of children living with foster families has decreased by 3% in this reporting period. The number of children placed with a relative or a friend has increased by 6%. The pattern that has emerged over the last two years is that more family and friends' placements are being approved which means more children are remaining within their family or with known adults.

The use of secure accommodation and legal orders was used once in this year.

Provision (as at 31 March 2024)	BCP Number	BCP 23/24 %	BCP 22/23 %
Foster placements	404	74%	73%
Placed for adoption	11	2%	2%
Placement with parents	22	4%	3%
Other placement in the community	19	3%	3%
Secure units, children's homes and semi-independent living accommodation	45	8%	17%
Other residential settings	42	8%	2%
Residential schools	2	<1%	<1%
Other placement	2	<1%	1%

13. Sufficiency Overview

As is the case nationally, there continues to be ongoing challenges in finding appropriate and local placements for our children and young people. This means that the number of children and young people being placed outside of BCP has increased significantly which has impacted upon workload capacity for some IROs who have a high number of children who live out of county.

In February 2024, a piece of work was undertaken to look at IRO allocations in respect of children and young people placed out of county. Of the 553 children and young people in care at that time, 14% were in placements up to 50 miles out of county; 15% were in placements more than 50 miles out of county. For two IROs, over 50% of the

children and young people they worked with were placed out of county. For the rest of the IRO team, they held workloads of between 33% and 46% of children and young people placed out of county.

Although it is acknowledged that out of county placements fluctuate, the continued trend is that placement sufficiency in house and locally is challenging. Should the numbers increase, it is likely that the IRO establishment will also need to increase to manage this.

Over the latter part of this financial year, work has been focused upon reducing the number of unregulated/unregistered placements. This has reduced such placements from eight to two in a relatively short time. At year end, there were two unregistered placements with active work continuing to reduce this further.

The IRO service continues to monitor such placements as per the IRO Service Practice Standards, working closely with the social worker to monitor and make sure a child or young person's needs are being met.

14. Timeliness of Child in Care Reviews

In this reporting period, 1529 child in care meetings took place. This is a 3% increase from the previous year.

	Number of CIC Reviews 22/23	Number of CIC Reviews 23/24
Q1	356	369
Q2	353	369
Q3	380	413
Q4	384	378
Total	1473	1529

94% of child in care meetings took place within timescale this financial year. This is an increase of 4% from the previous year and a 6% increase from the 2021/22 reporting period. This demonstrates that despite the increased number of reviews taking place, performance in respect of timeliness has continued to improve over the last three years and remains good. We are aware of why meetings have not taken place within timescale which has been down to late notification of first meetings to the IRO service by social work teams and newer IROs miscalculating dates.

The timeliness of letters to children and review minutes being completed by IROs has improved significantly. The majority are completed within 20 days of the child's meeting taking place and sent out within the 5 day timescale by business support.

Weekly reports are sent to the IRO team manager and service manager, which helps to monitor the timeliness of meetings, the write up of minutes and them being sent out.

The standard of practice in relation to IROs written letters to children continues to be good. Feedback from a child via his social worker was that the child puts his letters from his IRO on his bedroom wall so that they are there for him to read. The most common positive feedback received in practice learning reviews is the quality of the IROs written letter to the child or young person.

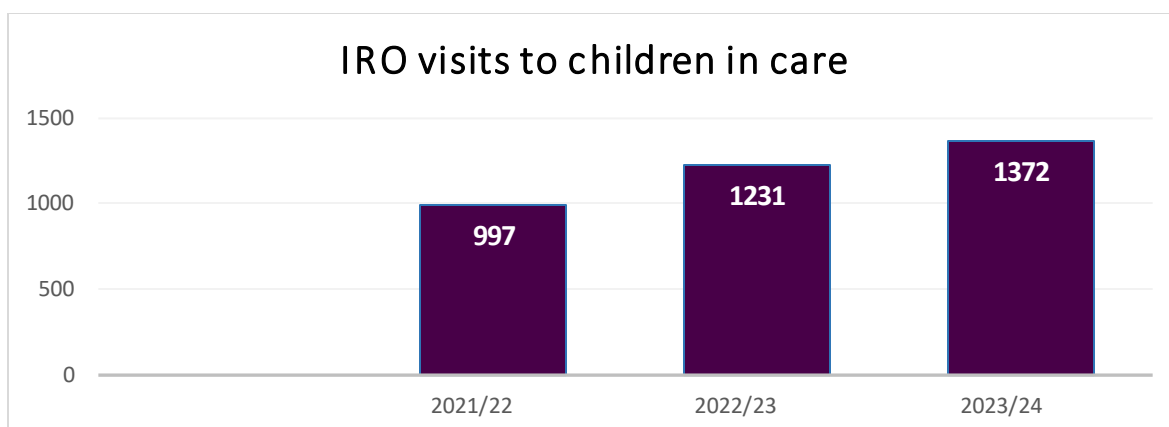
The majority of child in care meetings are undertaken face to face. Out of county child in care meetings also take place face to face.

With the exception of one agency IRO, the rest of the team are permanent and all live either close to, or within the BCP area. We are no longer reliant upon agency members of staff who live out of the BCP and neighbouring areas to chair CIC meetings. Permanent, local members of staff have had a significant and positive impact upon the quality of service delivery and the number of face to face meetings taking place.

It is the exception for meetings now to be held virtually. There are occasions when this does happen, for example if a child or young person requests this. The number of virtual meetings is monitored by the team manager.

15. Participation & Engagement.

The number of visits undertaken in this reporting period was higher than the previous year. 1,372 visits were undertaken as opposed to 1,231 last year. This is an increase of 11%. Recorded visits to children has increased year on year for the past three years. A stand alone IRO visit to children and young people template was added to BCP's case management system in March 2024 (see appendix) which now makes it easier for the frequency and quality of IRO visits to be monitored. Visits to children and young people prior to their meeting is better embedded in IRO practice now resulting in more children and young people attending their meetings and their views being central in the review process.



The below table shows the improvements in child/young person participation and children/young people attending their meetings which has increased over the last three years. Consistency of team manager and IROs has assisted with this. There is still more work and thought needed to help increase the number of children and young people attending their meetings which is underway. We are confident that with continued stability in the team, the number of children and young people attending their meetings will increase further. Our workforce is first and foremost child centred. The comment heard most from our staff is that direct work with children is the best part of their role.

	Participation	Number of children who attended their meeting
2023/24	99%	59%
2022/23	95%	40%
2021/22	92%	43%

There are various ways in which a child or young person can participate in the review process. Some of our young people have felt confident enough to lead their own meetings with the support of their IRO and were able to articulate their own views. For some children and young people, they have preferred to share their views with their IRO, advocate or another significant person prior to the meeting which have then been shared within the meeting by this adult. The increase in IRO visits to children and young people has meant that the voice of children and young people, is more evident in records of the meetings.

We continue to send out consultation forms to children, young people, parents and carers. The return rate is still low and we are looking at ways to address this. Using a QR code and developing an app are options that we are looking into.

Children continue to receive a profile of their IRO when they come into care or if they have a change in IRO. Feedback about the profiles has been positive. An example of

a profile is included at the end of this report. The IRO has had positive feedback from children and young people about her profile which helped to open up conversations with children and young people who were more at ease on meeting their IRO after reading it. The profile includes details for Coram Voice and also has a link to the child's version of the IRO handbook.

16. Advocacy

All looked after children in BCP have access to an advocate or independent visitor. Coram Voice continue to be the advocacy provider for BCP's looked after children and care experienced young people. The IRO Service Manager is the lead officer overseeing the Coram Voice contract along with a BCP Contracts Manager. Coram Voice also provide advocacy to young people aged 16 or 17 who are considered as a child in need and are considered homeless.

Headline data from Coram Voice annual report 2023/24:

Advocacy

- 30% of the overall referrals received were for looked after children
- 12% of referrals received were for care experienced young people
- The majority of referrals received, 58%, were for children subject of a child protection plans
- The majority of referrals were made by social workers
- The referral rate via an IRO was lower than last year
- The majority of children in care with an allocated advocate live in the BCP area.
- The furthest face to face advocacy support offered was to a young person in Cumbria.
- The number of referrals for children and young people who identify as male and female has evened out this year being 97 and 99 respectively. There were 11 referrals where gender was not disclosed.
- 67% of referrals received were for children under 15, with 12 to 15 year old age group being the highest.
- The ethnic profile of children who were referred for advocacy is mainly White/British, with the next group being Black/British/African, then Black/British/Caribbean and then Asian/British Asian. In a small number of referrals, ethnicity was not disclosed.
- 28 referrals were received for children who have a disability

Independent Visitors (IV)

- 12 new IV referrals were received this year
- 18 young people have been supported in total
- At the time of writing the report, Coram Voice were awaiting a match for 4 young people

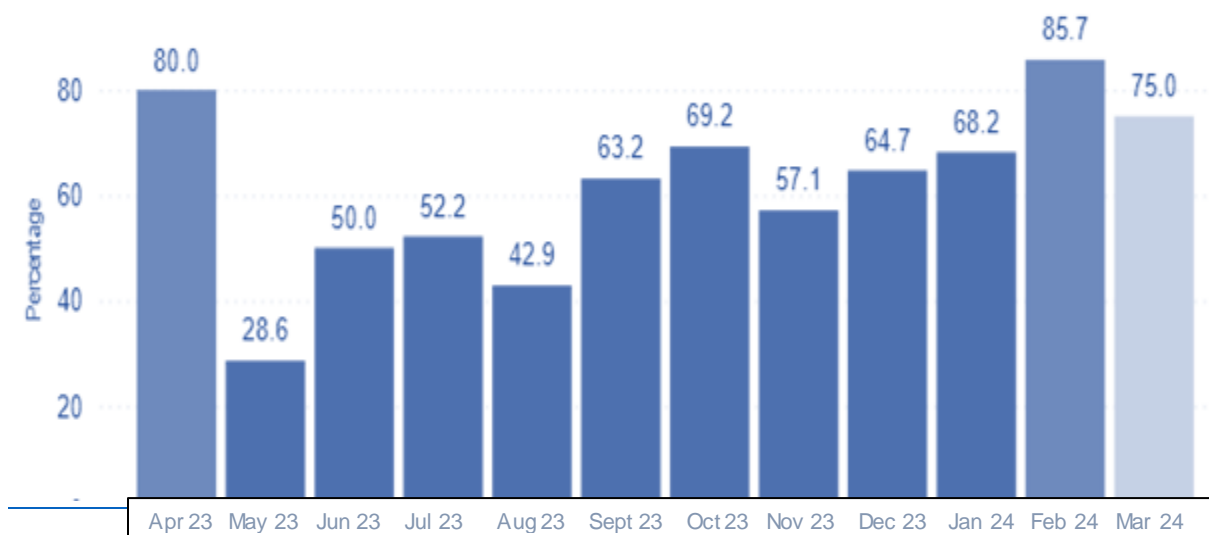
- The majority of referrals received were for young people of White/British/European backgrounds
- Only one referral was received for a young person who is of dual heritage
- 58% of referrals received were for males and 47% for females
- Of the referrals received, 75% recorded the young person as having a disability
- The age group with the highest number of referrals received was 12 to 15 year olds at 50%. 16% for 16-18 years olds and 33% for the under 11 age group.

Meetings are held with Coram Voice once every six weeks to review the advocacy and IV service provided. Work is being undertaken to look at why referral rates for looked after children are lower in comparison to those for children subject of a child protection plan. It is acknowledged that for this group of children, some have access to a Guardian, and all have an IRO as well as other professionals who can advocate on their behalf. This may be one of the reasons for the low referral rate for children in care.

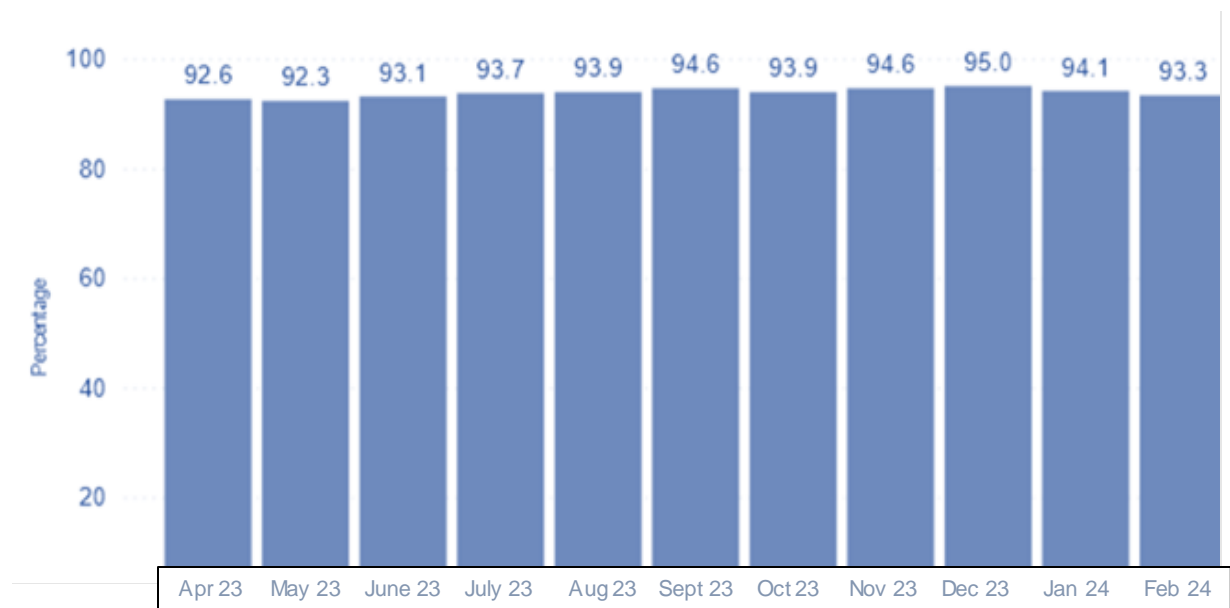
The IRO child visit template on Mosaic has made it mandatory for it to be recorded if a child has an advocate and that advocacy has been discussed with a child or young person.

17. Health

The timeliness of initial health assessments (IHA) continues to be low at 61%. This is a continuing trend from the previous year.



The data below shows the timeliness of review health assessments (RHA). 93% of RHA were undertaken on time in this reporting period. This is above all comparators.



There continues to be a low rate of children who are accessing dental care. At the end of the financial year, only 67% of the looked after population had an up to date dental check. IROs continue to raise with the child in care nurse any issues around dental care for looked after children. Work with health colleagues and social work teams is ongoing to address this issue.

18. Personal Education Plan (PEP) & Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

For children who were not on school role this financial year has fluctuated throughout the year spiking at 84 in July and 86 in August. From September onwards, the number of children not on role decreased and ranged between 22 and 27 ending in 29 at the end of quarter 4. Virtual school have good oversight of these children and work closely with social workers and IROs to address this. At the end of quarter 4, all children and young people had a PEP in place.

PEP and EHCP continue to form an integral part of care planning and it is the IROs responsibility to ensure that these plans have a positive impact on a child and young person's life and help them to achieve in life. An IRO needs to be satisfied that meetings to review these plans are taking place within timescales and that there is an up-to-date PEP/EHCP on the child's/young person's file that meets their needs.

19. Dispute Resolution Process (DRP)

The use of 'cause for concern notices' (informal escalation) has increased throughout the year and is more embedded in practice. There has been some learning for IROs around starting the informal process with a call to the social worker and team manager to attempt to try and resolve issues informally. Our goal is to achieve the required outcome for a child or young person by building relationships with our social work

teams and positively influencing social work practice through good communication, negotiation and healthy challenge.

From the table below, a high number of 'cause for concern' notices have been raised which have either been resolved or progressed to a formal escalation. The number of DRPs raised this reporting period is significantly higher than the previous year as the table below evidences. There are a number of contributing factors; monitoring and recording of DRPs has improved by business support and IROs, the use of DRP is better embedded in IRO practice and most have a better understanding of when to raise a DRP; the DRP spreadsheet is sent on a weekly basis to the relevant service managers who can see how many active DRPs are in their service area and what stage these are at so have oversight of this also.

Cause for concerns raised since April 2023	205
DRPs raised	
April 2022 - March 2023	71
April 2023 - March 2024	222

DRP data continues to be collated manually by business support officers and monitored by the team manager. A request has been made for the escalation process to be updated on Mosaic that will enable IROs to log escalations on Mosaic, and for these to be more easily monitored by social workers, IROs and managers. It is anticipated that Mosaic will be updated in September/October 2024.

The learning from PLRs, dip sampling and the DRP spreadsheet tells us that the escalation process is not used consistently by all of our IROs. The timeliness of the process can also be delayed which means that issues are not resolved in a timely manner.

The recording of the reasons why an escalation has been raised has been difficult to track manually so we do not have an accurate picture of the issues. This is the same for the tracking of the management level that the escalation was resolved at. What we do know is that a high percentage of cause for concern notices are raised when the report and/or care plan for a child's meeting is not available prior to the meeting taking place. A high number of formal escalations relate to drift and delay in care planning.

There have been no formal escalations to CAFCASS within this review period or independent legal advice being sought by a BCP IRO.

20.Quality Assurance

The Quality Assessment Framework is embedded across the services and monitored monthly by senior management at a quality assurance meeting. Focused reviews have

continued throughout this reporting period which have concentrated on neglect, care experienced young people and domestic abuse. The learning from these reviews has been shared with the team and is discussed in management meetings where examples of practice change as a result of the learning are highlighted.

We need to improve the way we enable our children, young people, parents and carers to provide feedback. At the moment feedback is limited to that obtained as part of the practice learning review process which is helpful but does not always focus on the work of the IRO. Feedback from children and their families is low and we are working on ways to increase this, for example, looking at the use of QR codes and apps.

Practice week continues to take place in BCP. In this financial year, MASH, Children and Families First Team, the PLO and Court Team and Care Experienced Young Person's Team were the service areas reviewed. As IRO work straddles most of these services, we were provided with feedback and learning from the practice weeks which was helpful. IROs also form part of the review team for practice weeks which helps with their learning and development.

All managers at every level undertake a monthly collaborative PLR which has provided the IRO Service with valuable feedback and learning on an individual and team level.

Practice Standards for all staff as well as specifically for IROs are in place. This supports practitioners to provide a consistent service that meets good standards of practice.

21. What is working well

- Despite the increase in numbers of children coming into care, the timeliness of meetings has continued to be good. We have continued to allocate an IRO within 24 hours of being notified of a child coming into care.
- IRO visits to children have increased year on year. The number of children and young people seen prior to their meeting has increased leading to more children and young people attending their meetings.
- Mid-point reviews are embedded in practice for most IROs meaning better oversight of care planning and earlier identification of drift and delay or other issues.
- A stable staff and management group has contributed towards there being more practice consistency across the team. The majority of children have had the benefit of a consistent IRO. This has led to better engagement from children in the review process and IROs who know their children, and their care plan well.
- Team culture is positive. We have a committed workforce who are supportive of each other and have shown resilience in more challenging times. There is a high support/high challenge model of management in the service which has developed

a trusting and respectful working environment across the team. The current team manager has been in post for over a year now and this has helped to provide stability to the team. Senior management has been stable for over two years which has resulted in driving forward improvements and achieving good results..

- Five agency members of staff converted to permanent posts within the IRO Service and remain with us.
- Peer supervision continues to take place and is led by either an IRO or Child Protection Chair. This has been beneficial to the newer members of the team who have been able to learn from more experienced IROs in a less formal setting.
- For the majority of the year, workloads have been stable and only for a short period of time did they go beyond the recommended workload in the IRO handbook. This has helped to improve the quality of practice in the team.
- Practice Standards are in place which brings about a more consistent way of working and sets out clear expectations and the required standards of practice for our staff.
- IRO impact is increasing. There is more visible evidence of IROs achieving good outcomes for children.
- The introduction of the IRO section in the practice learning review template helps us to identify areas of development both on an individual and team level.
- We have bespoke PowerBi that gives rich and relevant data for the IRO Service which helps us to manage our work, performance and meet our KPIs.
- The number of complaints received in respect of IROs continues to be low. Whilst this is only one aspect of how we assess our service delivery, it is reassuring that complaints from children, parents, carers and other professionals are at a minimum.
- As a management group, we continue to know our service and staff well, so know our areas of strength and development.

22. Our priorities for 2023/2024

- Continue to increase child attendance at meetings as well as further consider how we can increase children and young people leading their own meetings.
- Ascertain why we have a low number of advocacy referral rate for children in care.
- Increase IRO impact to address drift and delay and increase the number of children with an achieved care plan within 12 months of becoming looked after.

- All IROs to undertake mid-point reviews and for these meetings to evidence impact and follow on action when necessary.
- The development of online feedback survey for children and young people, parents and carers that captures their experiences and feedback on the review process.
- DRP process to be updated on Mosaic so as escalations can be monitored.
- Timeliness of the recording and sending out of child in care records to be maintained.
- Mid-point meetings are taking place now on a regular basis. We need to ensure that these meetings are meaningful and have an impact on the care planning process where there is drift and delay.
- Recruitment and retention of staff and providing a learning plan for 24/25.
- Focus on developing better links with social work teams.

Nicky Campbell –
3rd June 2024

23. APPENDIX

Good practice examples

Michael is 13 years of age. He had not seen his mum since he was a younger child and wanted to make contact with her again. His dad had passed away and he was worried that his mum may pass away and he wanted to get to know her. Michael spoke to his IRO shortly before his child in care meeting and told her this. Michael's IRO made some enquiries, Michael's IRO and Social Worker were able to track down Michael's mum and they started to have indirect contact with each other. Michael's social worker is now in the process of re-assessing Michael's mum in the hope that this could lead to her being reintroduced into Michael's life on a more permanent and substantial basis

Good Practice Story Board - Template



Alice, you, and your brother Jamie became subject to an ICO in Feb 2023 and initially lived with your paternal grandparents, then a foster family, then moved to live with your aunt, who is a connected carer. You both became children in care after your father was arrested and subsequently found guilty of downloading sexual images of children. Prior to becoming a child in care, you were subject to a Child Arrangement Order and lived with your dad following a Finding of Fact hearing where your mum was identified as the perpetrator of physical and emotional harm against you and Matthew. Your plan going forward is long term care with your connected carer.

What outcomes are we improving?

You need to be safe and cared for now and throughout your childhood. Any care plan of permanence for you and Jamie needs to be informed by comprehensive assessments. A Special Guardianship Order assessment was undertaken of your aunt and uncle, the outcome was positive. Due to other information coming to light, your aunt and uncle changed their minds about becoming your special guardians and if this was progressed, your uncle said he would end the marriage. The impact of this separation upon your aunt's emotional wellbeing and financial situation regarding the end of the marriage and your awareness of the different views held by your carers needed to be considered within the assessment. Also, your living arrangements became unusual in that you all moved to live in your father's house, and he had a significant amount of control over the day-to-day arrangements. It became unclear whether your aunt had the reparative parenting skills to keep you safe and meet your needs given your levels of trauma. An addendum SGO assessment was commissioned.

What is the Evidence?

The use of the escalation process meant that Helen raised her concerns informally to begin with, and then formally so as to address and resolve the drift and delay and gaps in assessment. Mid-point reviews have also helped Helen to have good oversight and monitoring of your care planning whilst her visits to you have enabled her to balance this with your own views

What has been delivered?

Helen has been your IRO since Jan 2023, she has visited you at home prior to your CIC meetings taking place to ensure she had your views. Your CIC meetings have taken place within timescales. The recommendations from these reviews are SMART and meaningful so as to progress your care plan. Helen has undertaken midway reviews between your meetings to drive your plan forward. Helen has raised a cause for concern on 30 May 2023 re the drift and delay in completing the viability assessment of your aunt and the risk assessment of your grandparents, this informal escalation led to the outstanding work being progressed. Helen raised a further DRP highlighting the gaps in the SGO assessment which led to an addendum assessment being commissioned to inform care planning. Helen has given her views in respect of your care plan and also communicated with your Cafcass Guardian. Helen has communicated regularly with the social work team in order to monitor the progression of your care plan.

What has been the impact for children, young people, and families?

We hope that you have felt listened to and that your views have influenced your care planning. By using the escalation process, Helen was able to highlight drift and delay and outstanding work which has now been completed in time for the end of the court process.

Team: Independent Review Service – Child in Care

Good Practice Story Board – SD (CP)



Amie became subject of a child protection plan under the category of neglect on the 14 December 2023, along with her older siblings. The concerns related to Amie's mother's substance misuse (cocaine), drug dealers attending the property, and the health and education needs of Amie and her siblings not being met by her mother. Amie and her siblings also witnessed domestic abuse. Due to concerns identified at the ICPC, the Child Protection Chair escalated his worries with the social work team, resulting in Amie and her siblings being discussed at a legal gateway meeting (LGM) held on the 18 December. It was agreed that the local authority would initiate care proceedings which resulted in Interim Care Orders being granted for Amie and her siblings on the 22 December 2023.

What outcomes are we improving?

- Amie and her siblings needed to be safe and feel safe which the child protection chair felt was not the case whilst they were at home with their mum.
- The children needed to be protected from exposure to substance misuse, domestic abuse and their overall needs met.
- The emotional welfare of the children who had experienced trauma
- Mother's lifestyle and the choices that she makes as well as improving her parenting abilities so as the children could return to her care.

What is the Evidence?

- CP Chair/ IRO footprint on the file to show how concerns for the children escalated to team manager directly after conference which led to care proceedings being issued. Robust child protection and CIC planning.
- Case notes from SW team evidencing pace and purpose to work with booking LGM meeting and then decision to issue care proceedings within a few weeks from ICPC held.
- Change of placement to carer when suitability of father's care raised by IRO.
- Minutes of conference and CIC review on file and signed off in timescales.

What has been delivered?

- CP Chair/IRO chaired conference and Initial CIC Review in timescales. The CP chair became the IRO for continuity.
- CP Chair escalated safeguarding concerns directly after ICPC with the Team Manager and recommended LGM (held 18 December) and raised further worries resulting in care proceedings being issued and ICOs granted 22 December 2023.
- The IRO has visited Amie and her siblings to ascertain their wishes and feelings so as these are central in the care planning process.

What has been the impact for children, young people, and families?

- Amie and her siblings are safe in the care of an approved foster carer.
- Amie and her siblings are not exposed to substance misuse, domestic abuse or having their needs unmet by their primary carer.
- Care Proceedings and a Guardian will also track the care planning process to ensure it meets the children's needs and is timely.
- Initial Health Assessment identified the need for a speech and language referral required and a referral is being completed; this will support Amie's voice being clearer and support her learning/development.
- Amie and siblings benefit from regular time with their parents and extended family.

Team: Child Protection Chair

BCP Council Civic Centre
Bourne Avenue
Bournemouth
BH2 6DY

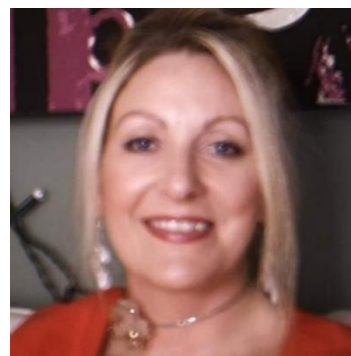


Date: 17/01/2025

Our Ref: NBLO / LH / TD

Hello Josie!

My name is Lorraine



I am an Independent Reviewing Officer who has many years of experience working with children, young people, and their families. I have been allocated as your Reviewing Officer and will be chairing your reviews.

All children and young people who are in care will have an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). I make sure you are safe, that all your needs are met with the best plans, and that your voice is heard in all meetings. I don't mind how you do this; you can speak to me, send me a text or email. You can do this anytime, even outside of the meetings if you want to. Of course, you are always welcome to attend your review or part of your review if you would like too as well.

In my role as an IRO, I am an independent voice, I make sure all professionals are doing a good job making sure the plans are meeting all your needs and that you are well cared for and happy whilst you are living away from home.

The meeting is your meeting where we talk about you, and as your Reviewing Officer, it is my job to make sure that your care plan meets your needs, so it is important that you help me to decide who you would like to invite and what you would like to discuss. If you would like to, you can lead some or all the meeting, and I would be happy to help you do this.

If you are too young or feel unable to speak for yourself, your current carer could contact me on your behalf.

Advocacy can be an important way to support you to share your wishes and feelings when you are looked after. For more information you can type in the link below into your web browser to see a video of young people talking about advocacy – what it is and how it helped them.

<http://www.coramvoice.org.uk/>

If you want to self-refer then it's best if you contact Coram Voice on 0808 800 5792 and someone will take your details, or you can text 07758 677036 to ask someone to call you back, or their Whatsapp on +44 (0)7758 670369. You can also email them on help@coramvoice.org.uk. Your Social Worker or I as your IRO can also make the referral for you.

I know a lot about you, so here are some facts about me:

I am the 3rd eldest in a family of 7 children. We are all adults now, but I do remember what it felt like to live in a busy household. My brothers and sisters live all over the UK and some live abroad.



My heritage is primarily Irish and Dutch but there is also a mix of Native American. Like lots of people my family heritage has roots from all over the world and my family members are from many different countries.

When I have time to and to relax, I really enjoy cooking and baking cakes. I am not amazing at baking, but I just enjoy baking and using lots of different flavours and colours to make a cake. One of my favourite tv shows is Master Chef and the Great British Bake Off.





I love walking and I like to take my metal detector with me.

I dream of finding long lost treasures and gold!



Finally, I love to go hacking once every few weeks. This means that I go to the stables and go out on a horse for about 30/ 60 minutes One of the stable girls or boys walks beside the horse as I am not ready yet to be let loose on my own. I really enjoy doing this because I find it really makes me focus on the horse, I use called Nina, and it reduces any stress I am feeling, and I get a good view of the countryside from such a height.

I look forward to meeting you and finding out about you and what sort of things you enjoy doing and think about doing in the future.

Until then, you can contact me on the following:

Lorraine.hanley@bcpcouncil.gov.uk

T. 01202 093680

M. 07500607735

You can find out more about what an IRO does by clicking on the link below:

[Young person guide to IRO Handbook](#)

(If you received this letter by post, we would have sent a link to this handbook to your or your current Carer's e-mail address)

Kind Regards,

Lorraine Hanley

Your IRO

IRO and CP Chair Visit Form

Details of visit

Type of Visit?

Child(ren)'s / Young Person(s) details

Your name

Visit details

Date and time of visit?

Virtual visit or Face to face?

Your voice

What you discussed with your IRO/CP Chair

Are you aware of the Coram Voice advocacy service and how to contact them?

Do you have an advocate?

Analysis

IRO/CP Chair analysis of the visit

Are there any actions your IRO/CP Chair needs to complete on your behalf?

Optional - Manager comments