 <b>Brent</b>	<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b> 3 <sup>rd</sup> February 2021
	<b>Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People</b>
<b>Brent Council Children and Young People          Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report (2019/20)</b>	

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	N/A
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
<b>No. of Appendices:</b>	N/A
<b>Background Papers:</b>	N/A
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## 1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This report provides the Committee with details of the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to quality assuring and improving services for Looked After Children (LAC). This report includes feedback from LAC gained through consultation with Care In Action, Brent's Children in Care Council. This report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO service in Brent as required by statutory guidance.

## 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review, comment on and question the contents of this report to ensure that IRO activity is providing effective support and challenge for services to LAC.

## 3. Details

### Summary of Key Messages

#### What has gone well?

- IROs have worked closely with social workers, Child Protection Advisors, Children's Guardians, advocates and the LAC nurse to ensure that children's voices are heard and are central to decision-making.
- Brent LAC Review records are child-focused, written as a letter to the child. This has been shared with at least three local authorities as an example of good child-centred practice.
- The majority of children and young people benefit from having the same IRO throughout their care journey and children and young people feedback positively about this.
- 97% of reviews are held well within timescales and managed in the way that best responds to the child's needs.
- IROs fulfil their challenge function, including escalation when appropriate, ensuring impact for children and evidencing good practice.
- IROs have supported the outcome of increased permanency for children, in particular focusing on formal Placement Planning Meetings for children whose plan is long-term fostering.
- IROs' knowledge and expertise ensures that IROs offer appropriate oversight and challenge to inform effective care planning and promote best practice.

Compliment from an IRO to a social worker:

*'Thank you again for preparing A and his sister prior to the review and your ongoing support to the foster carers. The parents have maintained a good working relationship with professionals and are supporting the care plan. This has been a challenging process and you have carried this family through. This is in no small part due to your commitment and hard work!'*

- Independent Reviewing Officer 4/3/20

#### What can be improved?

- There continue to be some instances when Pathway Plans and LAC Review documents are not completed in a timely manner and available before the review.
- There was a reduction in the total number of children referred for advocacy support in 2019/20. IROs need to raise the profile of advocacy support.
- IROs need to be more robust in scrutinising the transition plan for children with SEND, including proactive review of the Education Health and Care Plan and incorporating this into the Care Plan and Pathway Plan.

Compliment from an IRO to a social worker:

*'Thank you for the detailed care plan, report, support plan and final statement which you made available to me prior to the review. I thought the reports were well written and informative, clearly setting out the transition moving forward.'*

- Independent Reviewing Officer 04/03/20

#### 4. Review of 2019/20 IRO service priorities

The IRO service had four priorities to improve services and make an impact on positive outcomes for Looked After Children in 2019/20.

##### **Priority 1:** Complete the appointment of a permanent Service Manager

The recruitment of a permanent Service Manager is being undertaken as part of the overall restructure of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. A permanent Service Manager is expected to be appointed in summer 2020. In the meantime, there has been consistency in interim arrangements throughout the year, with one interim manager overseeing the Service.

##### **Priority 2:** Monitor timeliness of LAC reviews to reach a target of at least 95% of reviews being completed within timescale.

The timeliness of LAC reviews has been monitored and managed effectively for 2019/20. The percentage of LAC reviews completed within time in 2019/20 was 95.3%.

##### **Priority 3:** Increase the number of LAC chairing or co-chairing their review from 7 to 14 in 2019/20.

IROs have discussed this offer consistently with LAC throughout the year and LAC have been given the option to chair their own review. Children and young people when asked have said that they would rather contribute and participate rather than chair their own review. This has been important learning from children and young people on how they wish to participate in their own review. Moving forward, chairing their review will remain one option for young people to choose how they participate in the review.

**Priority 4:** Evidence that continuous learning from feedback from children and young people, parents, professionals and carers through LAC reviews is fully embedded into the Learning and Development offer.

Quality assurance work, including audit activity and the LAC Tracking Panel, routinely reviews feedback from children about their care experience, including information gathered in their review. Themes and trends around this activity are regularly shared with IROs to drive practice improvement. This feedback is also used to develop practice improvement initiatives through our Learning and Development Offer. This includes Principal Social Worker led reflective sessions, the L&D newsletter and direct work tools.

## 5. Purpose of the IRO service

- 5.1 The Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children's Act 2002 make it a legal requirement for the Local Authority to appoint an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to each child in care. The IRO Handbook provides the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and their employers on their functions in relation to the case management and reviews for Looked After Children. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Looked After Children and challenging drift and delay.
- 5.2 The IRO's primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child in care and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. It is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, nor supervise the social worker or devise the care plan. Although it is important for the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child, this should not undermine or replace the relationship between the social worker and the child.
- 5.3 The IRO has the authority, independent of their employing Local Authority, to refer cases to the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) should they believe the Local Authority's plan for the child is not in their best interests. The Statutory guidance states that the IRO manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Compliment from an IRO to a social worker:

*'This case has moved forward in such a positive way since you have come on board. You have been consistent in following up review recommendations. You have always kept me up to date with developments and overall just shown a clear commitment and positive work ethic.'*

## **6. Professional profile of the IROs**

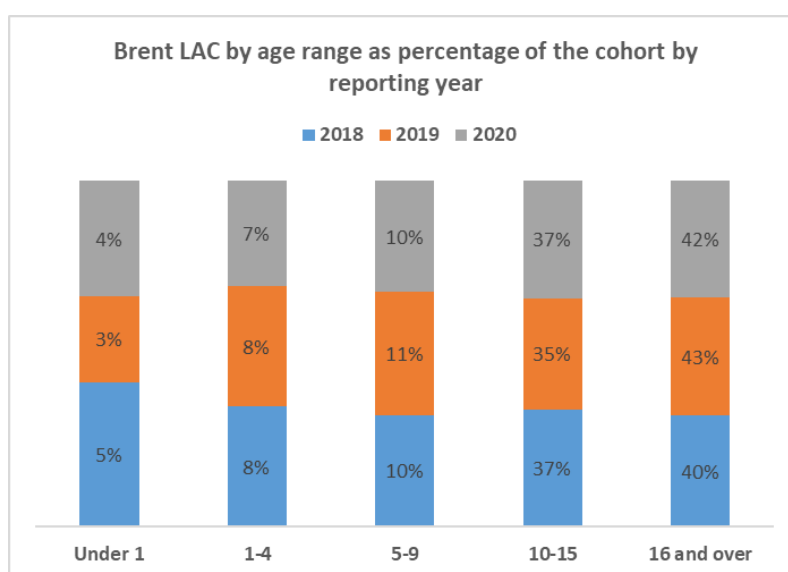
- 6.1 The IRO service sits within the CYP Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. From September 2018, the IRO service was brought together with Child Protection Advisors who chair Child Protection conferences and the LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) to form the Review and Safeguarding Team.
- 6.2 The Review and Safeguarding Team is managed by an experienced social worker. Brent directly employs two full time IROs and five Child Protection Advisors. The remainder of the IROs are experienced social work practitioners contracted through an independent agency, Aidhour (a not-for-profit company established in 1998). All IROs are Disclosure and Barring Service checked, Health Care Professional Council registered and fully qualified. Many of the IROs have been undertaking reviews for Brent for a number of years and know the children well. In some instances, the IROs have been the most consistent and trusted person in the child's life.
- 6.3 Following a review of the current arrangement, an extension was granted for Aidhour to continue providing IROs until October 2020 to allow a commissioning process to take place using the same model of in house and commissioned IROs. The current model of having in-house and commissioned IROs gives flexibility to respond to service demands while maintaining continuity and consistency for children and young people. For example, one of the Permanent IROs was on maternity leave from June 2019 until the end of the reporting period and during this time, cases were allocated to Aidhour.
- 6.4 There are 14 IROs in Brent including those permanent and from Aidhour. The number has increased by three from last year as two are focussed on chairing Fostering Reviews. There is an equal representation of male and female IROs (7 males and 7 females). This overall high level of retention of IROs has led to continuity of IRO input, stability for many of our Looked After Children and supported consistency in scrutiny and challenge.
- 6.5 The ethnicity of the IROs is less diverse than that of the Looked After Children population.

<b>IRO Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number</b>
White	10
Mixed	1
Asian or Asian British	1
Black or Black British	2

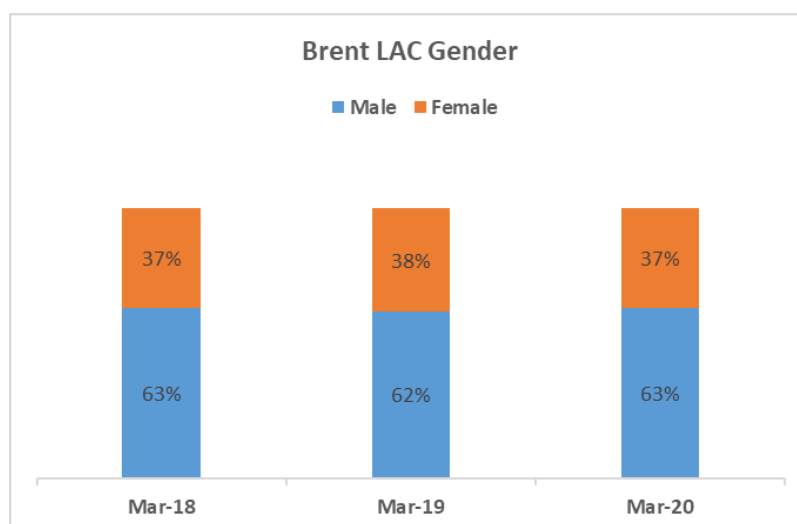
- 6.6 While it is noted that the ethnic composition of the IROs is not fully representative of the borough's Looked After Children population, services are provided within an equalities framework and all IROs, as qualified social workers, are expected to adhere to the Health and Care Professional Council code of conduct and Brent's internal policies and procedures. In addition to chairing LAC reviews, the two internal IROs also participate in undertaking audit and learning and development activity for staff and are part of the LAC tracking panel.

## 7. Profile of Brent's Looked After Children

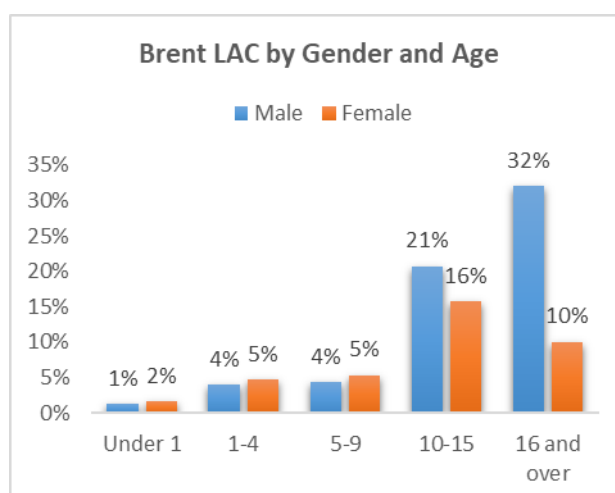
- 7.1 As of 31st March 2020, Brent had 299 Looked After Children, an increase of 1 in comparison to March 2019 when the LAC population was 298. This figure is lower than Brent's statistical neighbours and England in March 2018 and March 2019.
- 7.2 In March 2020, 65% of LAC were aged over 13 years old compared to 64% in March 2019 and 42% were aged 16-18, the same percentage as March 2019. This age profile is partially linked to external factors, such as the number of young people entering the UK as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).



- 7.3 As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, 63% of Brent LAC were male and 37% female, a similar proportion to the previous two reporting years. Gender disproportionality is more marked with older children admitted into care, which may relate to the number of UASC who are predominantly male.



7.4 A breakdown of Brent Looked After Children gender and age in March 2020 is below:



7.5 The ethnic profile of Brent Looked After Children has changed over the past 3 years. The percentage of White children has decreased from 24% in March 2018 to 18.7% in March 2020. The percentage of Black or Black British children has also decreased from 33% in March 2019 to 29% in March 2020. The percentage of LAC with an ethnicity categorisation of “other ethnic groups” has increased. The total Brent children and young people population has increased to 77,893 according to the ONS 2018 mid-year population estimates. During the last national census in 2011, - 31.8% the proportion of the young people population in Brent was Asian or Asian British, 25.7% was Black or Black British, 25.2% White, 9% Mixed/ Multiple and 8.3% other Ethnic group.

Ethnicity	Brent			Statistical Neighbours		England	
	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-18	Mar-19
% White	24	22	18.7	38	36	75	74
% Mixed	19	18	18.4	17	18	9	10

% Asian or Asian British	19	<5	14.7	14	10	5	4
% Black or Black British	31	33	29.1	29	31	7	8
% Other ethnic groups	<5	15	19.1	5	5	3	4

## **8. Referrals and allocations**

- 8.1 The interim Reviewing and Safeguarding Manager is responsible for ensuring children who come into care are allocated an IRO. Referrals to Aidhour are completed via the Aidhour Director who ensures children are promptly allocated to an Aidhour IRO, promoting effective communication and liaison with allocated social workers and the Review and Safeguarding Team. The team is supported by 0.5 post of a business support officer who processes invoices, liaises with Aidhour and allocated social workers and completes other administrative work as necessary.
- 8.2 Full time IROs carry a case load of 60 to 65 children at any given time. This case load is in line with national guidance and Ofsted recommendations. IROs are valued by social work staff as experts in the field of Looked After Children and as such offer guidance on care planning, as well as tracking individual plans through mid-way reviews.
- 8.3 Once allocated, IROs are expected to provide and maintain continuity and consistency in reviewing a child's care plan whilst they remain looked after. In addition, IROs complete midway reviews and liaise with the child's Guardian if there are court procedures as well as other professionals as and when required.
- 8.4 IROs carrying out review tasks have secure remote access to 'Mosaic', Brent's integrated children's services database, to input their reports and review the progress of a child's care plan. They are able to add a case note to a child's case record on Mosaic, record the midway review of care plans and identify any relevant issues that require escalation to senior managers for resolution. IROs also have secure remote access to the Brent internal e-mail system which facilitates confidential communication and information exchange, thus complying with data protection requirements.

## **9. Quality assurance and monitoring**

- 9.1 The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and the interim Service Manager oversee the work of Aidhour IROs through group supervision, quarterly contract monitoring, audits, meetings and direct observations. Group supervision takes place once every two months and contract meetings take place once a quarter. Practice improvement discussions take place at this meeting through consideration of case studies. These meetings are also used as a forum of communication for IROs to raise any issues they may have with senior leaders. Those who have attended in the last year include the Strategic Director, Children and Young People, Head of Service for LAC and Permanency, the Head of the Virtual School, service managers in LAC Permanency and Permanency, including those responsible for Leaving Care, Fostering and Adoption and the service manager for Children with a Disability.



- 9.2 IROs, both in-house and Aidhour receive bi-monthly group supervision following the Signs of Safety approach. These sessions are used to give IROs time to reflect on practice, highlight areas of good practice, raise any issues with managers and receive feedback on audit themes and outcomes. This space allows for reflection on how cases have been successfully escalated in the best interest of children and discuss practice themes and trends. As part of the development for IROs, guest speakers from services are invited, including 2019/20 Brent Virtual School, Brent YOS, Brent CYP Commissioning and Resources Team, the London wide Rescue and Response Service, Barnardo's and CAFCASS.
- 9.3 The interim Service Manager and the two in-house IROs are also members of the LAC tracking panel, carrying out regular audits looking at the quality of review minutes, participation of Looked After Children in the decision making process, any drift in the care plan, and identifying any health or education issues. These audits have evidenced that IRO oversight and escalation are having a positive impact on outcomes for Looked After Children. The audits have also evidenced IRO supported involvement of children and young people's views in decision making processes. Where children do not attend their LAC review, IROs contact children and young people between reviews to ensure that children and young people remain involved in their plan and review. IROs also ensure that parents / guardians are involved where this is appropriate and in the best interest of the child.
- 9.4 Through the LAC tracking panel, audits were carried out focusing on Pathway Planning, Personal Educational Plans, permanency planning, appropriateness of placement and placement changes, education and health outcomes, visits and the quality of LAC review minutes. Audits have identified good practice around participation of children and child-focused LAC review minutes. Areas for development identified include the robustness of some pathway plans and transition plans for children with SEND, including incorporating a child's Education Health and Care Plan into the Pathway Plan and LAC Review minutes. Feedback from the LAC Tracking Panel is routinely shared with Aidhour and IROs through contract monitoring and group supervision and contract monitoring meetings. In line with our Quality Assurance Framework, this ensures that learning from audit activity is shared with IROs to drive practice improvement.

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### Case Study: S

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*S is a 1 year old child who was relinquished by her mother at birth. S' mother stated that she has no means to provide S with good care. S's mother is from Eastern Europe and as such although S was born in the UK, S takes on the nationality of her birth mother. Mother made it clear that her wish is for S to be adopted and did not wish to provide details of extended family. S was accommodated under section 20 and placed in foster care. The LA made a referral to CAFCASS, while continuing to support mother and explore the wider family network including the whereabouts of the father. Following this exploration, an adoptive placement was identified for S with a successful move to a forever family.*

- 9.5 IROs continue to give positive feedback on the good working relationships with social work teams and work closely with Child Protection Advisors. This has assisted in both IROs and Child Protection Advisors responding to the needs of children and young people who become looked after following a period of being subject to a Child Protection Plan, in a timely manner. Child Protection Advisors are invited to the initial LAC review of any child who becomes LAC after a period of being subject to CP plan with a view of contributing to robust care planning across the professional networks.
- 9.6 IROs are positive about the quality of permanency planning in Brent including involvement of the wider family network at the earliest possible stage of permanency planning and the joint working observed between the locality and care planning services. IROs have been consulted on the review of Permanency Planning Meetings for Looked After Children over the age of 12.
- 9.7 The interim Service Manager attends London IRO Managers and West London Children's Guardians Meeting. These meetings look at local and national issues affecting Looked After Children as well as highlighting any learning that can be taken forward. Brent IROs have a good working relationship with Children's Guardians within West London Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).
- 9.8 The annual meeting between the Strategic Director, Children and Young People and IROs took place on 22/01/20. IROs were updated on the outcome of the Brent ILACS focussed visit from Ofsted under the theme of Leaving Care and the action plan devised following this. IROs were also updated on the continued drive to increase the number of permanent staff and the Department's strategic priorities. The Strategic Director confirmed that no issues had been escalated to her in the past year and IROs were encouraged to escalate any unresolved issues if necessary.
- 9.8 Brent IROs have an established protocol with CAFCASS regarding good practice for Public Law work. This has helped to ensure cases in proceedings are subject to robust analysis and challenge about the matters of critical importance to the child's safety, wellbeing and permanency. Children's Guardians have provided positive feedback on both social work and IRO practice. At the last meeting held with CAFCASS Children's Guardians have stated that they have found Brent IROs responsive and independent.
- 9.9 Overall the quality of the minutes and how IROs chair and approach LAC reviews are assessed through audit to be good. Mid-way reviews and other activities such as escalations are visible on every file audited with some improvements required in the way minutes are distributed to children and partner agencies following a LAC review.
- 9.10 Following the first COVID-19 lockdown in late March 2020, IROs began to hold reviews virtually. Swift communication on virtual LAC Reviews and information/training for IROs on new the technology available led to compliments from IROs about an organised and thought through approach. Children have fed back that they like this way of working and there has been an increase in

participation at LAC Reviews. Overall, this new way of working has been adopted well by children and professionals.

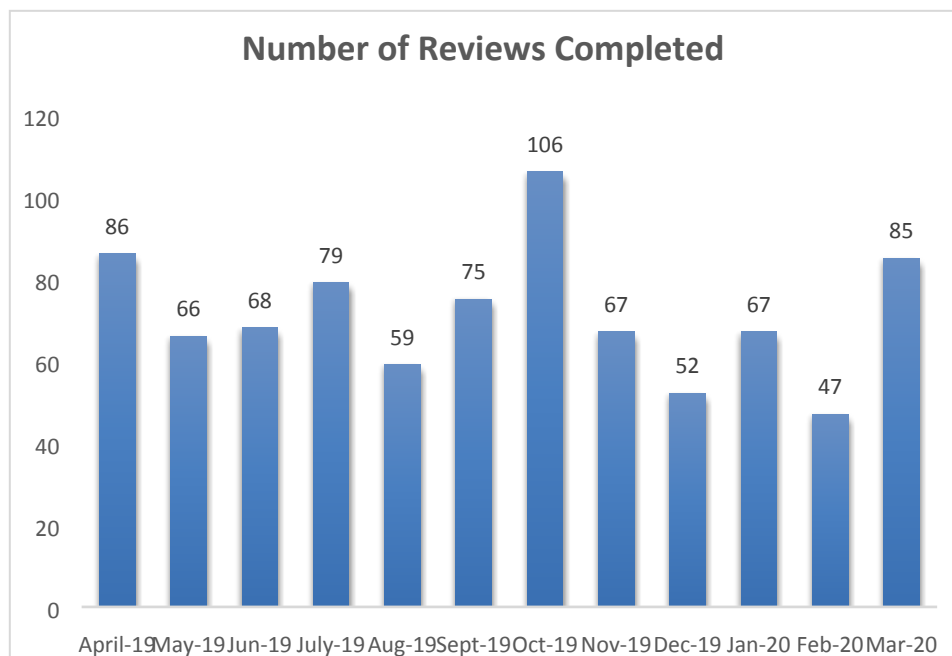
*'I like that you saw my bedroom and my favourite toy through video link'*

- Looked After Child, 11 years,  
26/3/20

## 10. Performance of the IRO service

### 10.1 Performance summary:

- A total of 845 reviews were chaired by IROs in 2019/20, an increase of 69 reviews compared to 2018-19 (776 reviews).
- The vast majority of children and young people aged over 4 years (558 reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves.
- On average there are 70 reviews chaired each month with peaks of 107 in Oct 2019, 86 in April 2019 and 81 in March 2020. Less busy months were December 2019 (51 reviews) and February 2020 (45 reviews). This variation is largely due to availability of children and young people, professionals, carers and family members in holiday periods.



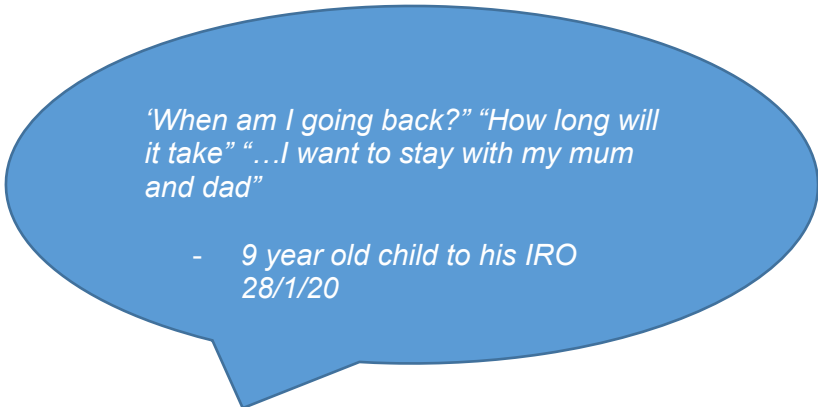
Overall, 97% of Reviews in 2019/20 were held within the statutory timescales.

10.2 Reviews are responsive and managed in the way that best responds to the child's needs. Examples include:

- IH is a LAC of 16 years and is an unaccompanied minor who came in to care when he was 13 years of age. The IRO, in discussion with IH and other professionals, identified that IH would like to remain in his placement long term and requested to stay there post 18 under staying put arrangements. The IRO escalated this to the service manager and following this, IH was formally matched with his carers through the formal PPM process and agreement for staying put given subject to a review nearer his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- An IRO identified a delay in completion of an Education, Health and Care Plan for a 9 year old child placed in a long term foster placement. The IRO escalated this to Brent Virtual School and this was swiftly resolved.

## 11. Attendance and Participation of children

11.1 It is always preferable that children attend their review meetings and give their views. However, there are some children with additional needs and children who have suffered trauma which may impact on their behaviour who therefore may not be able to participate fully at their review meeting. IROs are sensitive to these children's needs and work with the allocated social worker and carer to listen to a child's views, wishes and feelings in a way more suited to them and incorporate this into their care plan. Children and young people are allowed to say how and who should attend their review. The service has actively sought out best practice examples to improve participation of children and young people.



*'When am I going back?' 'How long will it take' '...I want to stay with my mum and dad'*

- 9 year old child to his IRO  
28/1/20

11.2 Reviews offer an important opportunity for children to have their say about their care plans and for professionals and carers to listen and take children's views into account. IROs encourage children to attend their reviews. If a child does not

want to attend their review he/she can participate in a number of other ways. Participation types are recorded in the chart below:

Type of participation	Number of Reviews in 2018-19	% of Reviews in 2018-19	Number of Reviews in 2019-20	% of Reviews in 2019-20
Child physically attends and conveys verbally	544	67.16%	559	65.23%
Child does not attend but is represented	28	3.46%	45	5.25%
Child aged under four	94	11.6%	100	11.67%
Child does not attend but conveys through medium such as an advocate	113	13.95%	128	14.94%
Child does not attend and is not represented	12	1.48%	17	1.98%
Child attends but does not convey and is not represented	8	0.99%	6	0.70%
Child attends and is represented	8	0.99%	2	0.23%
Child attends and conveys symbolically	3	0.37%	0	0.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>810</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>857</b>	<b>100%</b>

11.3 The majority of children and young people aged over four years (559 or 65.23% of reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves.

Children's participation continues to be a strong focus of IROs and the social workers to ensure that the child's voice is heard and that reviews are held at a time and place to facilitate the greatest opportunity for attendance.

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### **Case study: M**

*M is an 18-year-old who entered care at the age of 15 and was placed in foster care due to his mother's mental health concerns. M has one younger sibling and two half siblings. M regularly speaks to and visits his parents and siblings.*

*M focused on his education and to support this, he moved to a semi-independent accommodation near his college in another local authority. M achieved good results in his GCSE and A levels.*

*During his time in care, M's IRO advocated on his behalf to be given additional tuition sessions and the opportunity to view his semi-independent accommodation before moving. M was also able to go on holiday with his father and siblings during the summer. At his final review, M presented as a very confident person ready to move to independent living and study at university.*

## 12. Advocacy

- 12.1 IROs routinely check that children and young people know about advocacy and how it can support them in having a say in decisions affecting their lives. As part of the initial LAC review children and young people are given information on Brent's advocacy and complaint service by their IRO. They also check at each review whether an Independent Visitor is needed and if there are any communication needs requiring additional or specialist support.
- 12.2 From April 2019 all advocacy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers is provided by Aidhour and commissioned on an individual basis as and when required. The total number of children referred for advocacy support in 2019/20 was 48. This is a reduction of 14 from 2018/19 and represents 16.5% of Looked After Children. In addition, 10 children had an Independent Visitor allocated. This is the same number as 2018/19.
- 12.3 The majority of advocacy requests related to children and young people's concerns in the following areas:
- Support required in the choice, type and location of placement
  - Young people not happy with their proposed care plan
  - Support required against a decision of age assessment for UASC
  - Contact with family members, particularly children wanting an increase in contact
- 12.4 Children placed in secure accommodation for their own safety under s25 of the Children Act 1989 are always provided with an advocate.

## 13. Quality of Care Planning

- 13.1 A primary function of IROs is to monitor the quality of care plans. IROs report that most children have a child friendly care plan, written in a clear and coherent manner. Children and young people are supported to contribute to their care plan and children and young people receive their own copy of their care plan.

## 14. Progress between reviews

- 14.1 IROs keep regular contact with social workers and monitor progress on permanency and care plans through a mid-way review conducted either by meeting with the social worker or via a telephone call or email with the social worker. The two in-house IROs take part in the LAC tracking panel and feedback to the wider group of the IROs at the IRO meeting of any emerging themes and patterns for all IROs to consider.
- 14.2 All Looked After Children are given a child friendly leaflet entitled 'My Independent Reviewing Officer' at their initial review. The leaflet has details of their IRO's name, contact number and email address. Children often contact their IROs directly to discuss issues worrying them.

*'I would rather be with my parents but if not I am happy with my foster placement and want to stay here'*

- 9 year old 28/1/20

## **15. Oversight of care plans**

- 15.1 IROs continue to monitor the quality of social work reports to ensure that reports meet the expected standard with attention paid to the child's progress in physical health, emotional wellbeing, school life and academic attainment, permanency and identity needs. Social workers' reports and updated care plans are not always available before the review. This does not allow the child, carers, parents and the IRO time to fully prepare for the review.
- 15.2 LAC have given feedback to indicate that they do not always receive the minutes following a LAC review. IROs also raised that social work reports are not always available at LAC reviews. Whilst IROs are satisfied overall with the level of communication and liaison that exists with social workers, there continue to be some instances when IROs are not consulted prior to a change of a care plan or placement.
- 15.3 IROs continue to drive social work practice by ensuring that young people have a Pathway Plan provided in a timely way and by escalating concerns if this is not in place. This includes promotion of Housing Vulnerability reports and encouraging an exploration of Staying Put arrangements.
- 15.4 When children subject of a Child Protection Plan become looked after, IROs work closely with Child Protection Advisors to bring forward the Child Protection Conference and avoid dual plans. This area of practice will continue to be developed and monitored.

## **16. Children's views about their IRO and their review process**

- 16.1 Overall the experience reported by children of their IROs continues to be positive. The interim Service Manager regularly receives feedback from the Looked After Children's Participation Officer and attends Care in Action, Brent's Children in Care Council. Children and young people state that they appreciate the consistent approach of IROs alongside their independence and availability. Children have also said that their IRO listens to their concerns and takes up issues with the relevant services where this is needed and that the issues are often resolved quickly.

In 2019/20 99% of Looked After Children over the age of four communicated their views, wishes and feelings at their reviews. This may have been through their attendance, through correspondence or completing a consultation form, by briefing an advocate, or through discussion with the IRO. IROs report that young people contact them between reviews by email or phone to share information or request support. IROs support children to chair or co-chair the meetings if they wish to do so.

Children and young people say that they do not always agree with their proposed care plan but are generally happy with the support given by their allocated social workers. IROs are consulted when there is a change of care plan or placement and also receive regular feedback following the LAC tracking panel held monthly and outcomes of children placement panel and entry to care panels. Children and young people said that they prefer and appreciate the face to face discussion they have with their IRO prior to their review than having to complete consultation forms. Children and young people have said that having to complete consultation forms is not interactive enough. Children and young people also appreciate access to advocacy which is always granted upon request by children and young people or other professionals such as allocated social workers, IROs and foster carers.

*'I do not want to move to foster carer'*

- Child  
25/11/19

*'It's been a pleasure having her with us. We treat her just like any of our children. The same rules and expectations apply. We are happy to see her do so well.'*

- Brent Foster carer about young person regarding their staying put arrangement  
19/11/19

*'L is doing much better and she seems much happier. She is a joy to have around'.*

- Foster carer 25/11/19

## 1. Escalations and conflict resolution

One of the key functions of the IRO is to identify and resolve problems arising from the care planning process. In Brent this function is undertaken through an agreed Looked After Children Escalation Management Process. The IRO in the first instance, seeks to resolve the issue informally with the social worker and the social worker's manager. If this is unsuccessful the IRO escalates this to the Team Manager and Service Manager. If the issue is not resolved, the IRO will escalate further to the Head of Service.

16.2 Issues identified in escalation are used to target support and challenge practice to make improvements. Young people have reported that they feel supported when IROs raise concerns and alerts about practice or plans.

16.3 A total of 32 escalations were initiated by IROs in 2019/20 compared to 49 escalations in 2018/19.

*'I would like to return to live with my family and need an advocate.'*

- young person age 14



16.4 Of the 32 case escalations raised by IROs, all but three were resolved at the social worker, Team Manager, Service Manager and Head of Service levels. Three reached the Operational Director level. The three cases dealt by the Operational Director concerned lack of clarity on a care plan for a baby, an unplanned placement move regarding a young person who had repeated missing episodes and a request for the Local Authority to consider secure accommodation. The overall issues raised in escalations include the following areas:

- Key work and emotional support to young people in semi-independent placements
- Delay in progressing care plan
- Delay in the completion of Personal Education Plans, Placement Planning Meetings and health assessments
- Safeguarding concerns such as child sexual exploitation and young people going missing
- Delay in the application for a passport for a Looked After Child.
- Contact with siblings and wider family members.

16.5 The use of the escalation processes proved successful in resolving issues in the vast majority of cases. In a small number of escalations, complexities of the case meant that the response to the issues raised by the IRO did not fully resolve the IRO's concern. In these cases differences of opinion were acknowledged and senior management oversight ensured there was clear Local Authority decision making in the best interests of the child.

16.6 One example of a successful escalation is when an IRO disagreed with the care plan of a 14-year-old who was in a kinship arrangement. There were a variety of concerns in the young person's immediate family including parental alcohol misuse, familial gang affiliation and potential criminal exploitation through county lines. The young person was proactive in making her wishes and needs known in the review process. The IRO listened to her views and raised concerns when the Local Authority did not complete a Kinship Assessment of her aunt and uncle who she was living with that meant that she may have needed to move to a foster care placement. The IRO advocated for the young person to remain with her aunt and uncle until such a time that she could go home. The IRO challenged the Local Authority around drift and encouraged social workers to progress the care

plan. The IRO encouraged the professional network to listen to the young person who communicated the strong need for her to remain in the care of her family network. This is a good example of using the review process to listen carefully to the young person about how she could remain both safe and in the care of her family.

## **17. Priorities for 2020/21**

17.1 Priorities to improve the IRO service during 2020/21 are as follows:

1. IROs to provide additional scrutiny in the transition plan for children with SEND, including proactive review of the Education Health and Care Plan and incorporating this into the Care Plan and Pathway Plan.
2. IROs to promote Care in Action and Junior Care in Action and the Brent advocacy offer at every review.
3. IROs to monitor completion of reports and distribution of LAC Reviews and where, this is not happening in a timely manner, escalate to the appropriate Service Manager.

### **Contact Officer**

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