



Corporate Parenting Committee

13th October 2021

**Report from the Strategic Director of
Children and Young People**

**Brent Council Children and Young People Independent Reviewing
Officer (IRO) Annual Report**

Period of review: 1st April 2020 to 31 March 2021

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
No. of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details)	<p>Sonya Kalyniak Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Sonya.Kalyniak@brent.gov.uk</p> <p>Sandra Cornwall Interim Service Manager, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Sandra.Cornwall@brent.gov.uk</p>

The Annual IRO Report is prepared by the Safeguarding and Review service in accordance with the statutory requirements to inform the Corporate Parenting Committee and senior leaders regarding the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) on quality assuring and improving services for Looked After Children (LAC).

1. Profile of the Safeguarding and Reviewing Team

The Safeguarding and Reviewing Team consists of:

- An experienced interim service manager
- Two full time IROs and five Child Protection Advisors
- One LADO
- One Contextual Safeguarding Lead
- The remainder of the 12 IRO staff are commissioned through Aidhour, an independent agency

Aidhour are commissioned to perform IRO duties. All are experienced qualified social workers. All the IROs are Disclosure and Barring Service checked and Social Work England Registered. Many of the IROs have been undertaking IRO duties for a number of years and know their children well. In some instances, the IROs have been the most consistent and trusted person in the child's life.

Aidhour are commissioned to provide IROs until October 2023 where the contractual arrangements will be reviewed.

There are a total of 14 IROs in Brent. There is an equal representation of male and female IROs (7 males and 7 females). However, the ethnicity of the IROs does not reflect the diverse population of our looked after children. Overall the high level of retention of IROs has led to continuity of IRO input for many of our Looked After Children.

Table 1: IRO Ethnicity

IRO Ethnicity	Number
White	10
Mixed	1
Asian or Asian British	1
Black or Black British	2

Foot note: Black or Black British includes Black Caribbean, Black African, Black Angolan, Black, Congolese, Black Ghanaian, Black Nigerian, Black Sierra Leonean, Black Somali, Black Sudanese, Black European, Black North American and Any other Black background.

White includes White –British, White-Cornish, White-English, White-Scottish, White-Welsh, White-Irish, Traveller of Iris heritage, Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Greek, Italian, Kosovan, Portuguese, White Eastern European, White Western European, Gpsy/Roma, Turkish, Serbian, any other white background

Mixed includes White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Pakistani, White and Indian, Asian and any Black, Asian and Chinese, Black and Chinese, Chinese and any other ethnic group, White and Chinese, Any other mixed background)

Asian or Asian British includes (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, African Asian, Nepali, Sri Lankan, Any other Asian background

2. Legal context and Purpose of the Service

The Independent Reviewing Service has been a statutory requirement since 2004. In 2010 the government published the 'Independent Reviewing Officer's Handbook', which is statutory guidance for IROs and local authorities. This was implemented in April 2011 and was linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance (2010). The responsibilities of the IRO have been broadened to include not only the management of the review process but a wider overview of the case, including regular monitoring and follow up between reviews.

The statutory duties of the IRO [section 25B (1), 1989 Act] are to:

- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case;
- participate in any review of the child's case;
- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

The core tasks of the IRO include:

- Ensuring the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child. As corporate parents, each local authority should act for the children they look after as a responsible and conscientious parent would act.
- Monitoring the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. This should include identifying patterns of concern. Where IROs identify more general concerns around the quality of the authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should alert senior managers. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice

Update on last year's priorities (for 2019/20)

- 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.**

IROs ensured additional scrutiny took place in this area and provided appropriate support and advice.

2. IROs to promote Care in Action and Junior Care in Action and the Brent advocacy offer at every review.

IROs have ensured they promote these services at every review and have encouraged attendance.

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.

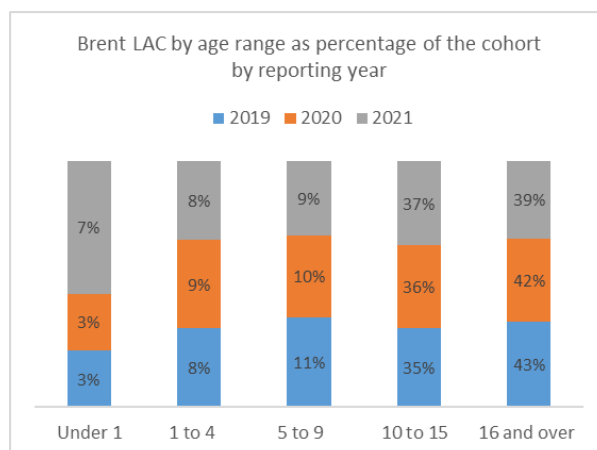
IROs have been actively raising escalations to the appropriate managers to ensure timely practice.

3. Profile of Brent’s Looked After Children

As of 31st March 2021, Brent had 288 Looked After Children, a decrease of 11 in comparison to March 2020 when the LAC population was 299. This figure is lower than Brent’s statistical neighbours and England in March 2020.

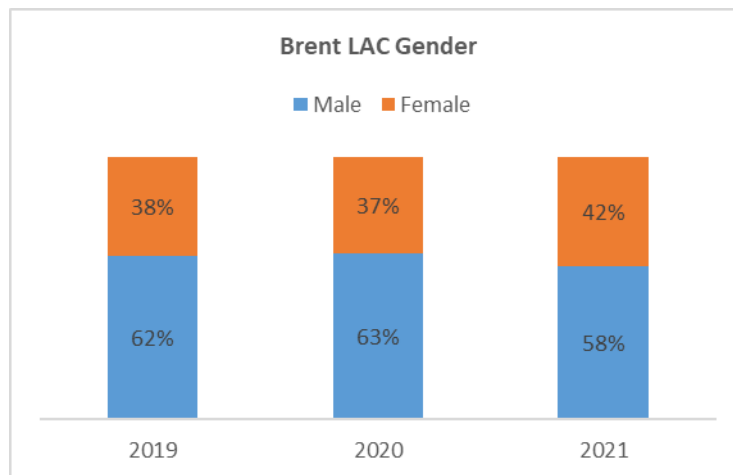
In March 2021, 64% of LAC were aged over 13 years old compared to 65% in March 2020 and 39% were aged 16-18, compared to 42% in March 2020. This age profile is partially linked to external factors, such as the number of young people entering the UK as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).

Table 2: Brent LAC by age range



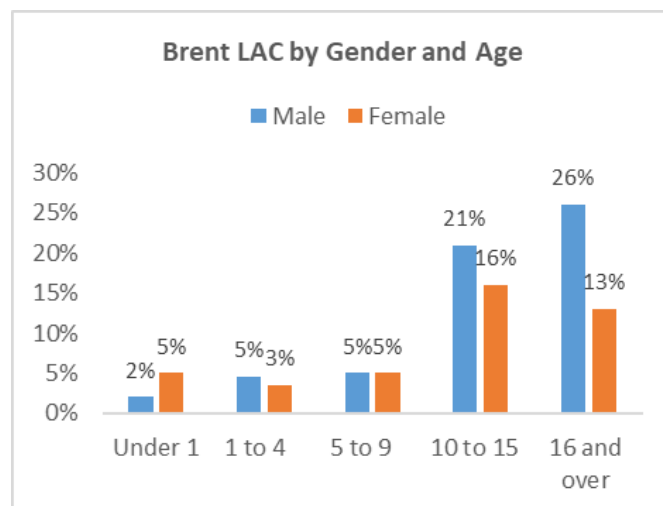
As of 31st March 2021, 58% of Brent LAC were male, fewer by 5% from March 2020 and 42% female, an increase by 5% from March 2020. Gender disproportionality is more marked with older children who have become looked after, which may relate to the number of UASC who are predominantly male.

Table 3 Brent LAC by gender



A breakdown of Brent Looked After Children gender and age in March 2021 is below.

Table 4 Brent LAC by Gender and Age



The ethnic profile of Brent Looked After Children has changed over the past 3 years. The percentage of White children has decreased from 22% in March 2019 to 19% in March 2020 and March 2021. The percentage of Black or Black British children increased by 4% to 33% in March 2021 compared to 29% in March 2020. The percentage of LAC with an ethnicity categorisation of “other ethnic groups” has decreased.

The total Brent children and young people population has increased to 77,687 according to the ONS 2019 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. There is an over representation of children in care from a Black and Black British and White ethnicity and an under-representation of LAC for an Asian or Asian British ethnicity.

Table 5 Ethnicity of LAC

Ethnicity	Brent			Previous Statistical Neighbours		Current Statistical Neighbours		England	
	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-21	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-19	Mar-20
% White	22	19	19	36	35	38	37	74	74
% Mixed	18	18	22	18	17	18	17	10	10
% Asian or Asian British	c	15	12	10	12	12	15	4	4
% Black or Black British	33	29	33	31	31	26	27	8	7
% Other ethnic groups	15	19	14	5	8	6	10	4	4

Foot note: White includes (White –British, White-Cornish, White-English, White-Scottish, White-Welsh, White-Irish, Traveller of Iris heritage, Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Greek, Italian, Kosovan, Portuguese, White Eastern European, White Western European, Gpsy/Roma, Turkish, Serbian, any other white background)

Mixed includes (White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Pakistani, White and Indian, Asian and any Black, Asian and Chinese, Black and Chinese, Chinese and any other ethnic group, White and Chinese, Any other mixed background)

Asian or Asian British includes (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, African Asian, Nepali, Sri Lankan, Any other Asian background)

Black or Black British includes (Black Caribbean, Black African, Black Angolan, Black, Congolese, Black Ghanaian, Black Nigerian, Black Sierra Leonean, Black Somali, Black Sudanese, Black European, Black North American and Any other Black background.

Any other ethnic group includes (Afghan, Arab, Egyptian, Filipino, Iranian, Iraqi, Japanese, Korean, Kurdish, Latin American, Libyan, Lebanese, Malay, Moroccan, Polynesian, Thai, Vietnamese, Yemeni, Refused, Information not yet obtained)

4. Quality assurance and monitoring

Caseloads for full IROs are between 60 to 65 children in accordance with national guidance and Ofsted recommendations. Social work staff value the expertise and knowledge of the IRO in the field of Looked After Children. IROs are utilised to offer guidance on care planning. IROs complete midway reviews and liaise with the child’s Guardian where appropriate in court proceedings as well as other professionals as and when required.

The interim Service Manager oversees the work of Aidhour IROs through group supervision, quarterly contract monitoring meetings, audits and direct observations. Group supervision takes place once every two months and contract meetings take place once a quarter. These meetings are also used as a forum of communication for IROs to raise any issues they may have with senior leaders. Invitations for internal staff and external professionals include:

- The Strategic Director of Children and Young People
- The Head of LAC and Permanency
- The Head of the Virtual School
- Service managers in LAC and Permanency, including those responsible for Leaving Care, Fostering and Adoption and the service manager for Children with Disabilities
- Brent YOS
- Brent CYP Commissioning and Resources Team
- the London wide Rescue and Response Service
- Barnardo's
- CAFCASS

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.

The interim Service Manager is a member of the LAC tracking panel and entry into care panel. Through the LAC tracking panel, audits are undertaken to focus on areas such as:

- Pathway Planning
- Personal Educational Plans
- Permanency planning
- Education and health outcomes
- Visits
- Quality of LAC review minutes

IROs continue to foster good working relationships with social work teams and work closely with Child Protection Advisors. This has assisted both IROs and Child Protection Advisors to respond 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.

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. IROs continue to have a good working relationship with Children's Guardians within West London Children and the Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).

The annual meeting between the Strategic Director, Children and Young People and IROs took place on 12/01/21. IROs were 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.

Thematic audit activity has highlighted the quality of the minutes to be good. Surveys have also highlighted how IROs conduct reviews is good. The IRO “foot print” on children’s files is evident through mid-way reviews and other activities such as escalations. This continues to be an area of focus for the Safeguarding and Reviewing service.

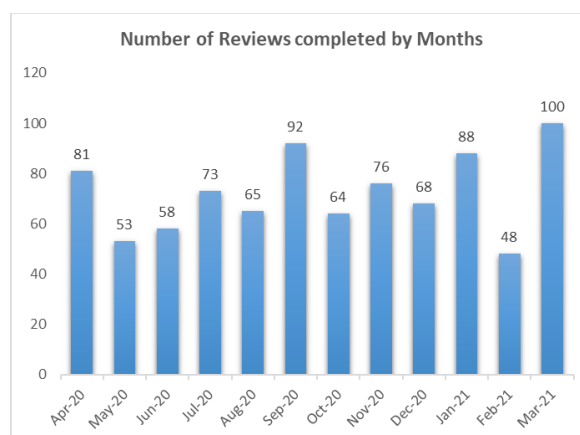
The IRO response to the Covid-19 pandemic continues to be child focused. Although the majority of LAC Reviews were virtual meetings, they quickly moved to a hybrid format when assessed as safe to do so. This enabled the IRO to visit the home and see the child/ young person to conduct the reviews with the child and carer present, with professionals attending virtually. Children continue to feedback they like the way the reviews are working. There has been an increase in participation at LAC Reviews. In the last 12 months this way of working has been adopted well by children and professionals.

5. Performance of the IRO service

Performance summary:

- A total of 866 reviews were chaired by IROs in 2020/2021, 9 reviews more than 2019-2020 (857 reviews).
- The vast majority of children and young people aged over 4 years (508 reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves.
- On average there were 72 reviews chaired each month with peaks of 92 In Sept-2020 and 88 in January 2021. Less busy months were February 2021 (48 reviews) and May 2020 (53 reviews). This variation is largely due to availability of children and young people, professionals, carers and family members in lockdown and holiday periods.

Table 6 Number of reviews per month



Overall, 97% of Reviews in 2020/21 were held within the statutory timescales.

6. Attendance and Participation of children

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. 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.

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:

Table 7: Participation types

Type of participation	Number of Reviews in 2019-20	% of Reviews in 2019-20	Number of Reviews in 2020-21	% of Reviews in 2020-21
Child physically attends and conveys verbally	559	65.23%	508	58.66%
Child does not attend but is represented	45	5.25%	75	8.66%
Child aged under four	100	11.67%	125	14.43%
Child does not attend but conveys through medium such as an advocate	128	14.94%	134	15.47%
Child does not attend and is not represented	17	1.98%	18	2.08%
Child attends but does not convey and is not represented	6	0.70%	2	0.23%

Child attends and is represented	2	0.23%	4	0.46%
Child attends and conveys symbolically	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Total	857	100%	866	100.00%

The majority of children and young people aged over four years (508 or 58.66% 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.

7. Advocacy

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.

From April 2021 all advocacy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers is provided by Coram Voice.

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

Children placed in secure accommodation for their own safety under s25 of the Children Act 1989 are always provided with an advocate.

8. Quality of Care Planning and progress between reviews

The IROs' main responsibility 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. Children and young people receive their own copy of their care plans.

The role of the IROs is to monitor progress on permanency and care plans through a mid-way review conducted by meeting with the social worker. This is either by a Teams call or meeting. All Looked After Children receive a child friendly leaflet entitled 'My Independent Reviewing Officer' at their initial review. The leaflet

contains their IRO's name, contact number and email address. Children often contact their IROs directly to discuss issues worrying them.

IROs also ensure young people have a Pathway Plan. They will ensure it is provided in a timely way and will escalate concerns if this is not in place. This includes promotion of Housing Vulnerability reports and encouraging an exploration of Staying Put arrangements.

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.

9. Children's views about their IRO and their review process

The interim Service Manager regularly receives feedback from the Looked After Children's Participation Officer. The interim Service Manager also attends Brent's Children in Care Council. Overall the experience reported by children of their IROs continues to be positive. 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 2020/21 97.9% of Looked After Children over the age of four communicated their views, wishes and feelings at their reviews. This has been attained by different mediums:

- Through their attendance,
- Through correspondence or completing a consultation form,
- By briefing an advocate, or through discussion with the IRO.

IROs have reported young people contact them between reviews by email or phone to share information or request support. IROs support children to chair or co-chair their review meetings if they wish to do so.

10. Escalations and Practice Alerts

One of the key functions of the statutory role of the IRO is to seek resolution to any problem or disagreement arising out the care planning process. It is a core part of their role to scrutinise practice and challenge the Local Authority and hold them to account in relation to achieving good and timely outcomes for children. To do this, IROs must establish good working relationships with social workers and their managers in order to be able to effect a good dispute resolution process and with good support of this process by senior managers. Alongside this responsibility, IROs in Brent also have a role in identifying good practice so learning from what works well for children and young people can also be understood and replicated.

The IRO Handbook, legislation and guidance around the planning for Cared for Children requires Local Authorities to ensure they have a good Formal Dispute Resolution in place. Whilst this may look different in each local authority all systems must have a 20-day maximum time limit to resolve any disagreement from the beginning of the process to its conclusion. In Brent this commences with an Informal

Practice Alert being raised by the IRO with resolution at this level within 5 working days with the Team Manager. If this is not achieved, then the IRO will escalate to a Formal alert allowing a further 10 days to reach resolution with a Senior Manager. If there were still no agreement after 15 days, then the IRO may escalate concern to CAFCASS.

Escalation have risen this year compare to last year. In 2020/21 there were 49 escalations initiated by IROs compared to 32 escalations in 2019/20.

The overall issues raised in escalations include the following areas:

- Delay in progressing care plan
- Delay in the completion of Personal Education Plans
- Delay in Placement Planning Meetings
- Delay in Health assessments
- Contact with siblings and wider family members.

The escalation process provides an avenue to resolving issues in the vast majority of cases. In some instances differences of opinion are acknowledged. Senior management oversight ensures clear Local Authority decision making in the best interests of the child. There have been no escalations to the Strategic Director.

11. Priorities for 2021/2022

Priorities to improve the IRO service for 2021/22 are as follows:

1. Formalising a hybrid model of working for the future in consultation with children and young people.
2. Reviewing consistency of IRO practice across LA employed and commissioned IROs.
3. Auditing how escalations are tracked to ensure these make a difference to children.
4. Driving Pathway Planning from the age of 16 and escalating when this is not in place.
5. Driving high quality LAC reports that are shared with families and partners in a timely way.

Report sign off:

Gail Tolley

Strategic Director Children and Young People