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|                     | <b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b><br><br>20 July 2022                   |
|  | <b>Report from the Strategic Director<br/>of Children and Young People</b> |
| <b>Brent Council Children and Young People Independent<br/>Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report</b> |  |
| <b>Period of review: 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022</b>   |  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Wards Affected:</b>  | All   |
| <b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>   | N/A   |
| <b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b><br><small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph<br/>of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local<br/>Government Act)</small> | Open  |
| <b>No. of Appendices:</b>   | N/A   |
| <b>Background Papers:</b>   | N/A   |
| <b>Contact Officer(s):</b><br><small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>   | Shirley Parks<br>Operational Director - Safeguarding, Partnerships<br>and Strategy<br><a href="mailto:Shirley.Parks@brent.gov.uk">Shirley.Parks@brent.gov.uk</a><br><br>Sonya Kalyniak<br>Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance<br><a href="mailto:Sonya.Kalyniak@brent.gov.uk">Sonya.Kalyniak@brent.gov.uk</a><br><br>Shabana Farooq<br>Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing<br><a href="mailto:Shabana.Farooq@brent.gov.uk">Shabana.Farooq@brent.gov.uk</a> |

## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 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) to the quality assuring and improvement of services for Looked After Children (LAC).

## 2.0 The IRO Function

- 2.1 The IRO function sits within the Safeguarding and Reviewing Team. This team consists of:
- A permanent Service Manager

- Two full time IROs and five Child Protection Advisors
- One LADO
- One Contextual Safeguarding Lead
- The remainder of the 13 IRO staff are commissioned through Aidhour, an independent agency

2.2 Overall, the high level of retention of IROs has led to continuity of IRO input for many of our Looked After Children. Aidhour have been commissioned to provide IROs for Brent for many years. They are currently commissioned until October 2023 where the contractual arrangements will be reviewed. Many of the Aidhour 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. All Aidhour IROs are experienced qualified social workers who are Disclosure and Barring Service checked and Social Work England Registered.

2.3 There are a total of 15 IROs in Brent, with representation of male and female IROs (6 males and 9 females). However, the ethnicity of the IROs does not reflect the diverse population of Brent Looked After Children.

**Table 1: IRO Ethnicity**

| <b>IRO Ethnicity</b>   | <b>Number</b> |
|------------------------|---------------|
| White                  | 8             |
| Mixed                  | 5             |
| Asian or Asian British | 0             |
| Black or Black British | 2             |

(see footnote 1)

### **3.0 Legal context and Purpose of the Service**

3.1 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 were 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.

3.2 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

#### **4.0. Update on priorities for 2021/22**

4.1 The following provides an update on priority areas for development in 2021/22:

##### **1. Formalising a hybrid model of working for the future in consultation with children and young people.**

Following the end of Covid-19 restrictions, the expectation was that LAC Reviews take place in-person, including IROs visiting the home in advance to gather the views of children. However, there are circumstances when a virtual/hybrid LAC Review is helpful. For example, a virtual/hybrid review may be required when there are Covid cases in the household/professional network or there are other circumstances that prevent everyone attending in person. There are also times where a young person has requested a virtual meeting as they find face-to-face reviews intimidating or triggering.

This is now an option for all LAC Reviews where circumstances suggest it would be helpful. IROs have confidence using technology to facilitate a review and virtual/hybrid meetings have been a valuable tool to engage with young people. Children feedback they like the way the reviews are working and there has been an increase in children's participation in LAC Reviews.

##### **2. Reviewing consistency of IRO practice across LA employed and commissioned IROs.**

The Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing, is responsible for the IRO Service and has actively focussed on building consistency across LA employed and commissioned IROs. This has been done through quality assurance activity including reviewing of performance indicators and identifying themes from audits and feeding back to IROs on audit findings. Bi-monthly meetings with all IROs focus on developing IRO practice and building consistency in recording and report writing.

##### **3. Auditing how escalations are tracked to ensure these make a difference to children.**

The Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing, regularly checks escalations and tracks these to ensure they are resolved. The Service Manager also reviews escalations through the LAC Tracker Panel to promote timely resolution to escalations. Processes have been put in place to ensure that, if there are thematic issues arising, these are escalated to the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

##### **4. Driving Pathway Planning from the age of 16 and escalating when this is not in place.**

Pathway Plans are routinely checked at LAC Reviews. When young people reach the age of 16, and a Pathway Plan is not in place, has not been reviewed or is of poor quality in terms of planning for the young person's transition to adulthood, it is addressed with the social worker and escalated if required. IROs have reported an

improvement in Pathway Plans being completed within timescales. In 2022/23, IROs will be focussed on the quality of Pathway Plans.

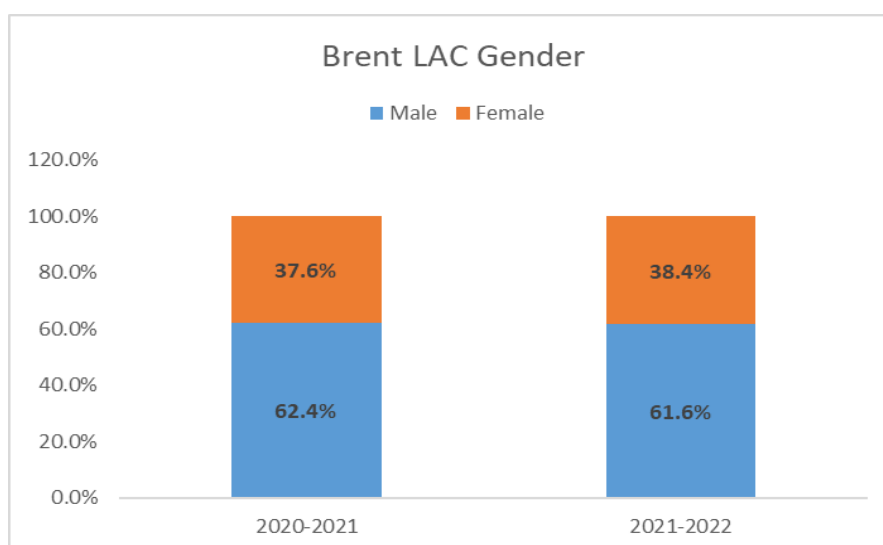
## 5. Driving high quality LAC reports that are shared with families and partners in a timely way.

Quality assurance activity has demonstrated that LAC reports are of a good standard and written in such a way that they are easy for young people to read and understand. The Service Manager, LAC and Permanency, shared positive feedback about the quality of reports at a recent IRO meeting. Targeted activity has focused on improving the timeliness of the distribution of LAC Reports with families and partners.

### 5.0 Profile of Looked after Children

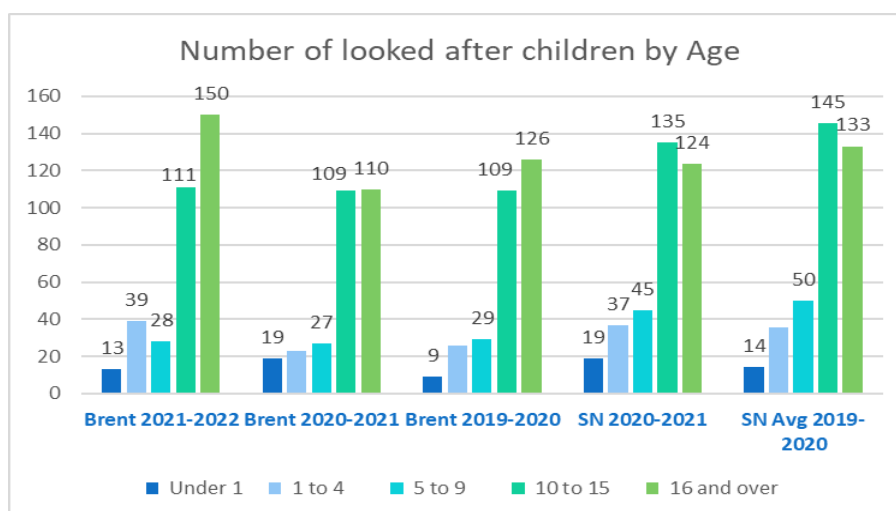
- 5.1 As of 31 March 2022 Brent had 341 children in care compared to 288 children on 31 March 2021, an increase of 18.4%. This represents 44 LAC per 10,000 head of child population against the rate for England of 62 per 10,000 head of child population, an increase in rate by 7 from previous year (37). On 31 March 2022, the Local Authority looked after 74 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) compared to 40 UASC in March 2021. This represents 21.7% of the total Brent LAC population. 61.6% male and 38.4% female, which is comparable to previous year 2020-2021. In 2021/2022, 49 children became children looked after for a second or subsequent time, compared to 44 in 2020/2021.

**Table 2: Brent LAC by gender**



- 5.2 A total of 44% of the Brent Looked After Children at the end of March 2022 are aged over 16 years old, compared to 38% at the end of March 2021. 76.5% of Looked After Children are aged 10 and over. This age profile is partially linked to external factors, such as the number of young people entering the United Kingdom as UASC. Having a predominantly adolescent LAC population requires IROs to have a sharp focus on outcomes such as placement stability, post-16 pathway planning for education, employment and training.

**Table 3: Brent LAC by age**



- 5.3 The ethnicity of Looked After Children has broadly been similar over the past two years. However, there has been a decrease in the number of Looked After Children from Mixed and Black or Black British backgrounds and an increase of children from Other Ethnic groups and Asian backgrounds.

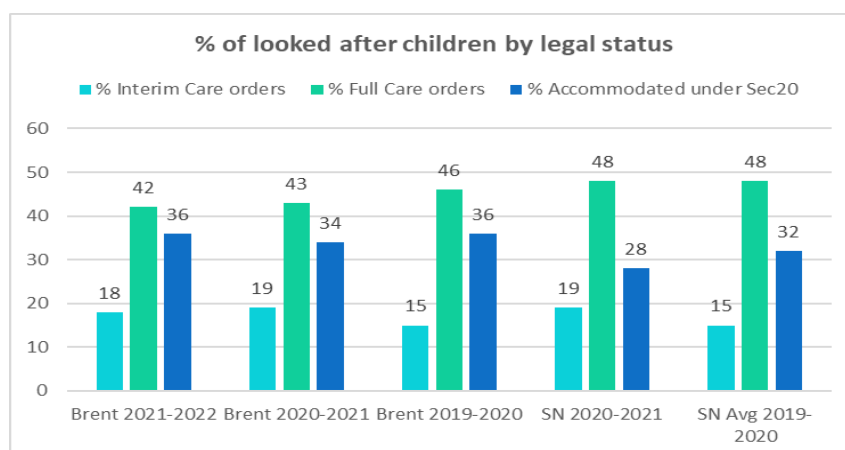
**Table 4: Brent LAC by ethnicity**

| Ethnicity                | Brent  |        |        | Statistical Neighbours |        | England |        |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|------------------------|--------|---------|--------|
|                          | Mar-20 | Mar-21 | Mar-22 | Mar-20                 | Mar-21 | Mar-20  | Mar-21 |
| % White                  | 19     | 20     | 21     | 37                     | 38     | 74      | 75     |
| % Mixed                  | 18     | 21     | 19     | 17                     | 18     | 10      | 10     |
| % Asian or Asian British | 15     | C      | 13     | 15                     | 14     | 4       | 4      |
| % Black or Black British | 29     | 33     | 29     | 27                     | 25     | 7       | 7      |
| % Other ethnic groups    | 19     | 14     | 18     | 10                     | 6      | 4       | 3      |

(See footnote 1)

- 5.4 As of 31 March 2022, the majority of Looked After Children were subject to Care Orders (Interim and Full Care orders) under the Children Act 1989, representing 60% of all LAC in this reporting year. A further 124 children (36% of all LAC) were in care through a voluntary agreement with the parents/carers as pursuant to Section 20 of the Children Act 1989.

**Table 5: LAC by legal status**



## 6.0 Brent LAC placement arrangements

- 6.1 The proportion of children placed more than 20 miles away from their home address as at 31 March 2022 was 16.4%, compared to 19.8% in 2020/21 (the national average is 14%). Brent aims to place children close to their families and local support networks. However, in some cases when young people enter care in adolescence, they need to be placed out of borough for their own safety. Placement sufficiency is a national and London-wide concern and it can be difficult to identify local placements for adolescents with highly complex needs. *Brent's Placement Sufficiency Strategy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers 2020-24* includes measures to broaden placement options for Looked After Children. The local authority is working with other London authorities on commissioning strategies aimed at increasing access to high quality local placements.
- 6.2 Most LAC were living with foster carers on 31 March 2022 (60%) which is lower than in 2021 (63%). Identifying foster placements for older LAC continues to be a challenge due to a lack of sufficiency in particular for foster placements suitable for adolescents. Increases in late entrants to care, including UASCs, coupled by a lack of foster placements for adolescents means that many young people are placed in semi-independent accommodation.

## 7.0 Quality assurance and monitoring

- 7.1 Caseloads for full-time IROs are between 60 and 65 children in accordance with national guidance and Ofsted recommendations. Social work staff value the expertise and knowledge of IROs, who provide guidance on care planning. IROs complete midway reviews and liaise with the child's Guardian where appropriate in court proceedings, as well as with other professionals as and when required.
- 7.2 The Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing, oversees the work of Aidhour IROs through practice development meetings, quarterly contract monitoring meetings and audits. Group practice development meetings take 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

7.3 The Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing, 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 and IRO escalations

7.4 Quality assurance activity continues to be an area of focus for the Safeguarding and Reviewing service. This has demonstrated that the IRO "footprint" on children's files is evident through mid-way reviews and other activities such as escalations. 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.

7.5 To ensure that the local authority learns from the experience of other IRO services, the Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing, 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).

7.6 The annual meeting between the Strategic Director, Children and Young People and IROs took place on 12 April 2022. IROs were updated on the continued drive to increase the number of permanent social work 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 as necessary.

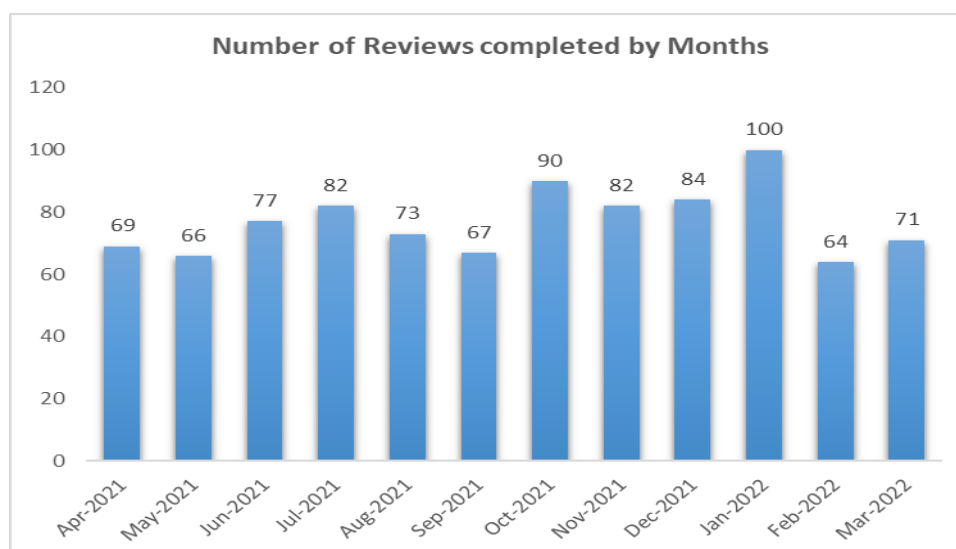
## **8.0 Performance of the IRO service**

8.1 The following information provides a summary of performance in 2021/22:

- 925 Reviews took place for 509 children, 59 reviews more than 2020-2021 (866 reviews).

- A total of 88% of reviews happened within statutory timescale. This is lower than in 2020/21 and in part due to high numbers of reviews in some months, which put pressure on resources. This is an area of improvement focus for 2022/23.
- On average there were 77 reviews chaired each month with peaks of 100 in January 2022 and 90 in October 2021. Less busy months were May 2021 (66 reviews), Sep-2021(67 reviews) and February 2022 (64 reviews).

**Table 6: Number of reviews per month**



## 9.0 Attendance and participation of children

- 9.1 It is always preferable that children attend their review meetings and give their views. Children's participation continues to be a strong focus of IROs and 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. 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 the participation of children and young people. There are, however, some children with additional needs or who have suffered trauma which impacts on their participation and who therefore may not be able to participate fully at their review meeting.
- 9.2 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 Table 7. The majority of children and young people aged over four years (575 or 62%) attended their review and spoke for themselves. This is an increase from 59% the previous year.



**Table 7: Participation types**

| Type of participation  | Number of Reviews in 2020-21 | % of Reviews in 2020-21 | Number of Reviews in 2021-22 | % of Reviews in 2021-22 |
|--|------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Child physically attends and conveys verbally                        | 508                          | 58.66%                  | 575                          | 62%                     |
| Child does not attend but is represented                             | 75                           | 8.66%                   | 80                           | 9%                      |
| Child aged under four  | 125                          | 14.43%                  | 128                          | 14%                     |
| Child does not attend but conveys through medium such as an advocate | 134                          | 15.47%                  | 118                          | 13%                     |
| Child does not attend and is not represented                         | 18                           | 2.08%                   | 10                           | 1%                      |
| Child attends but does not convey and is not represented             | 2                            | 0.23%                   | 5                            | 1%                      |
| Child attends and is represented                                     | 4                            | 0.46%                   | 7                            | 1%                      |
| Child attends and conveys symbolically                               | 0                            | 0.00%                   | 2                            | 0%                      |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>866</b>                   | <b>100.00%</b>          | <b>925</b>                   | <b>100%</b>             |

## 10.0 Advocacy

10.1 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. The local authority commissioned a new Advocacy Service from April 2021 for Looked After Children and Care Leavers which is provided by Coram Voice. The majority of advocacy requests related to children and young people's concerns in the following areas:

- Support at meetings
- Finance, benefits and debt
- Concerns about the social worker or personal advisor
- Housing

10.2 The hours of advocacy support will vary based on the need and nature of the issues identified by a young person. The Advocacy Service contract specification is based on 500 advocacy hours per year (of professional time) with a target of 60 children and young people accessing advocacy per year. In the first year of the contract, Coram Voice provided a total of 620 hours of advocacy support to 60 children and young people.

## **11.0 Quality of Care Planning and progress between reviews**

- 11.1 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 and receive their own copy of their care plans.
- 11.2 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 in-person 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.
- 11.3 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.

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

- 12.1 The Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing, regularly receives feedback from the Looked After Children's Participation Officer about children's experience of their IROs. 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. IROs have reported young people contact them between reviews by email or phone to share information or request support.
- 12.2 In 2021/22 98% of Looked After Children over the age of four communicated their views, wishes and feelings at their reviews. This has been attained through their attendance at review meetings, through correspondence or by completing a consultation form and briefing an advocate, or through discussion with the IRO. IROs support children to chair or co-chair their review meetings if they wish to do so.

## **13.0 Escalations and Practice Alerts**

- 13.1 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.
- 13.2 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.

13.3 Escalations have increased in 2021/22 compared the previous year. In 2021/22 there were 55 escalations initiated by IROs compared to 49 escalations in 2020/21. 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
- Social worker non-attendance at a LAC Review

13.4 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. In order to ensure that escalations are monitored and responded to in a timely way, the Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing has introduced an additional layer of scrutiny to monitoring escalations.

## 14 Priorities for 2022/2023

14.1 Priorities to improve the IRO service for 2022/23 are as follows:

1. Improved performance of the timeliness of LAC Reviews with a target of 95% held within timescale.
2. Enhancing consistency of IRO practice across LA employed and commissioned IROs through direct observations of LAC Reviews and sharing good practice.
3. IROs driving improvement in the quality of Pathway Plans, including reports demonstrating progress from one Pathway Plan to the next.
4. Increased focus on permanency planning for children over the age of 12 and ensuring that IROs are monitoring and escalating any cases where permanency is delayed.

### Footnote 1: Ethnicity Codes

**White includes** White –British, White-Cornish, White-English, White-Scottish, White-Welsh, White-Irish, Traveller of Irish heritage, Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Greek, Italian, Kosovan, Portuguese, White Eastern European, White Western European, Gypsy/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)

**Report sign off:**

**Gail Tolley**

Strategic Director Children and Young People

