	<p align="center"><b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b></p> <p align="center">17 July 2023</p>
	<p align="center"><b>Report from the Corporate Director, Children and Young People</b></p>
<p><b>Brent Council Children and Young People Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report April 2022 - March 2023</b></p>	

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

1.1 The Annual IRO Report is prepared by the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance 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 Service Manager
- Two full time IROs and 13 IRO's commissioned via Aidhour, an independent agency
- Five Child Protection Advisors
- One LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer)

- One Contextual Safeguarding Lead

- 2.2 Historically, 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 and are now experiencing recruitment and retention issues. Aidhour are currently commissioned until October 2023 when the contractual arrangements will be reviewed. 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 registered with Social Work England.
- 2.3 There are a total of 15 IROs in Brent, with representation of male and female IROs (6 males and 9 females). The ethnicity of the IROs is more reflective of the diverse population of Brent Looked After Children than it has been in previous years.

**Table 1: IRO Ethnicity**

<b>IRO Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number</b>
White British	<b>7</b>
White Other	<b>2</b>
Black or Black British	<b>4</b>
Mixed	<b>1</b>
Asian or Asian British	<b>1</b>

(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 includes 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 2022/23**

4.1 The following provides an update on priority areas for development in 2022/23:

##### **1. Improved performance of the timeliness of LAC Reviews with a target of 95% held within timescale.**

A total of 82% of reviews happened within statutory timescale. This is lower than in 2021/22 (88%) due to a combination of staff turnover in Care Planning teams and high numbers of reviews in some months. This is an area of improvement focus for 2023/24.

##### **2. Enhancing consistency of IRO practice across LA employed and commissioned IROs through direct observations of LAC Reviews and sharing good practice.**

Observation and auditing of IRO practice across in-house employed and the commissioned service has taken place over the last year. 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. There is evidence of some good practice-records of reviews that were written in child friendly language; however, the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Service (ILACS, February 2023) highlighted that the letters sent by IROs to children and young people were not consistently appropriate for children. Developing consistency in the letter sent to children following a review is an improvement area for 2023/24.

##### **3. IROs driving improvement in the quality of Pathway Plans, including reports demonstrating progress from one Pathway Plan to the next.**

IROs have assisted in ensuring that young people's wishes, goals and aspirations are considered within their Pathway Plans for when they transition from being looked after to care leavers. The Ofsted ILACS (February 2023) found that "care leavers contribute to their pathway plans, which contain their wishes, goals and aspirations. This places them firmly at the heart of decision-making and planning for their future".

##### **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.**

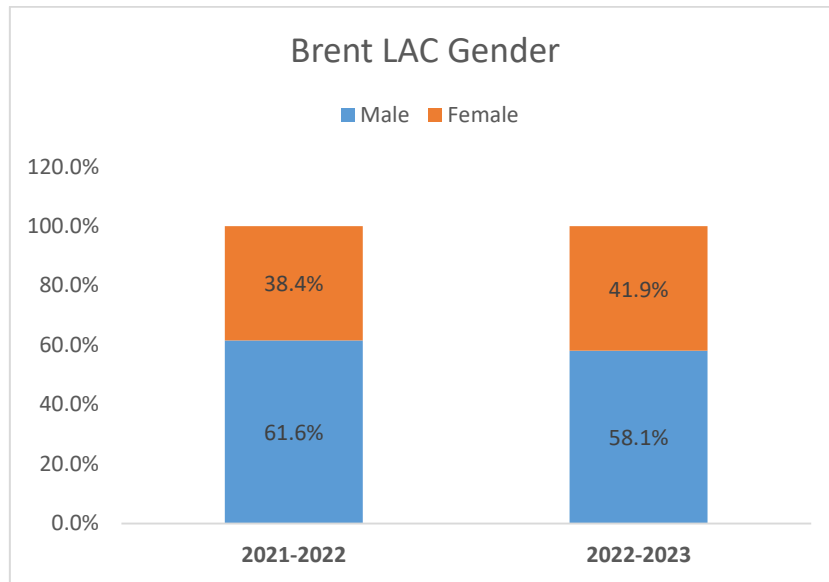
The efforts that IROs have made in this area alongside care planning and permanency colleagues have been acknowledged by Ofsted. The ILACS inspection report (February 2023) noted that "permanence planning is well considered for most children in care and gives them a sense of belonging and security in their home and care arrangements".

#### **5.0 Profile of Looked after Children**

5.1 As of 31 March 2023 Brent had 321 children in care compared to 341 children on 31 March 2022, a decrease of 6.2%. This represents 44 children in care per 10,000

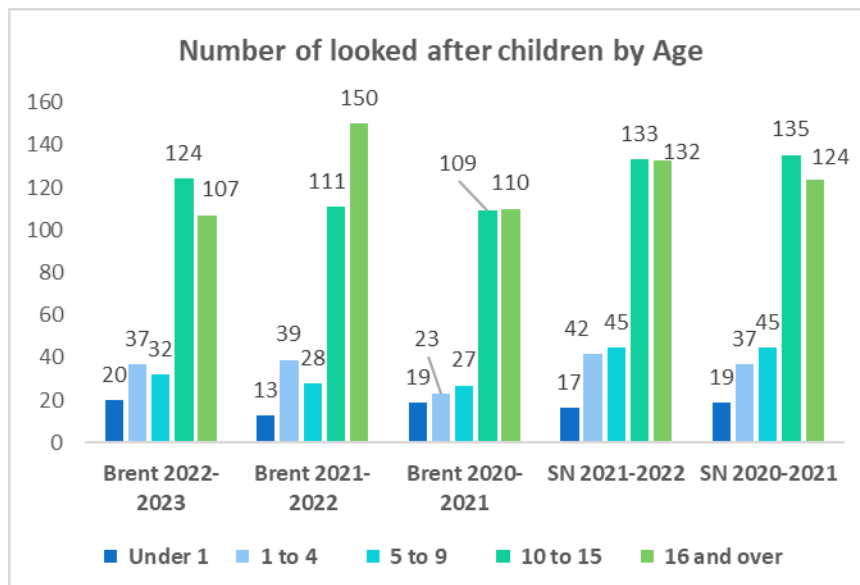
children compared to the England rate of 62 per 10,000 head of child population, a decrease in rate by 3 from previous year (47). On 31 March 2023, the Local Authority looked after 45 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) compared to 74 UASC in March 2022. This is a 33% decrease compared to the previous year and represents 14% of the total Brent LAC population.

**Table 2: Brent LAC by gender**



5.2 In terms of the overall LAC population there is a slightly higher (3.5%) proportion of female children in care compared to 2021-2022. However, there is still a higher proportion of male children in care.

**Table 3: Brent LAC by age**



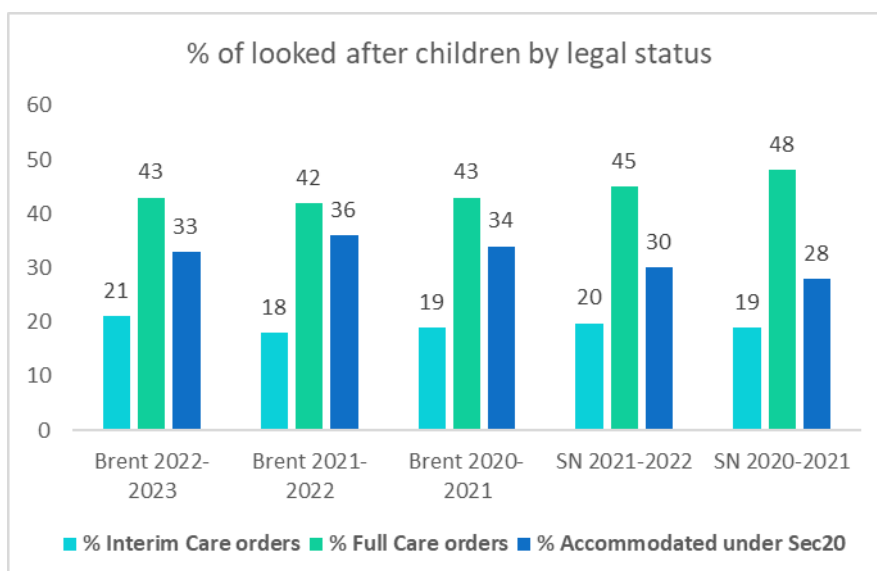
5.3 A total of 33% of the Looked After Children at the end of March 2023 were aged over 16 years old, compared to 44% at the end of March 2022. This reduction is partially due to a reduction of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children in the care system. 72.2% of Looked After Children are aged 10 and over. This age profile is partially linked to external factors, such as the number of young people entering the United Kingdom as UASC. Having a significant 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. The Localities Teams have continued to be proactive with progressing care plans resulting in a small increase in younger children entering care.

**Table 4: Brent LAC by ethnicity**

Ethnicity	Brent			Statistical Neighbours		England	
	Mar-23	Mar-22	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar-21
% White	21	21	20	34	38	73	75
% Mixed	22	19	21	18	18	10	10
% Asian or Asian British	15	13	c	15	14	5	4
% Black or Black British	29	29	33	25	25	7	7
% Other ethnic groups	13	18	14	9	6	4	3

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

**Table 5: LAC by legal status**



5.5 As of 31 March 2023, the majority of Looked After Children were subject to Care Orders (Interim and Full Care orders) under the Children Act 1989, representing 64% of all LAC. A further 105 children (33% of LAC) were in care through a voluntary agreement with the parents/carers as pursuant to Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. In

2022/2023, 46 children became children looked after for a second or subsequent time, compared to 49 in 2021-2022.

## **6.0 Brent LAC placement arrangements**

- 6.1 The proportion of children placed more than 20 miles away from their home address as of 31 March 2023 was 16.8%, compared to 16.4% in 2021/22 (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 2023 (66.3%) which is higher than in 2022 (60%). 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 Corporate 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 team. 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. A recent audit of reviews undertaken in March 2023 identified that these were still key areas of strengths but recognising that post review communication with children and young people would benefit from improved consistency as such the review templates have been revised and exemplars of best practice have been circulated to IROs.

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).

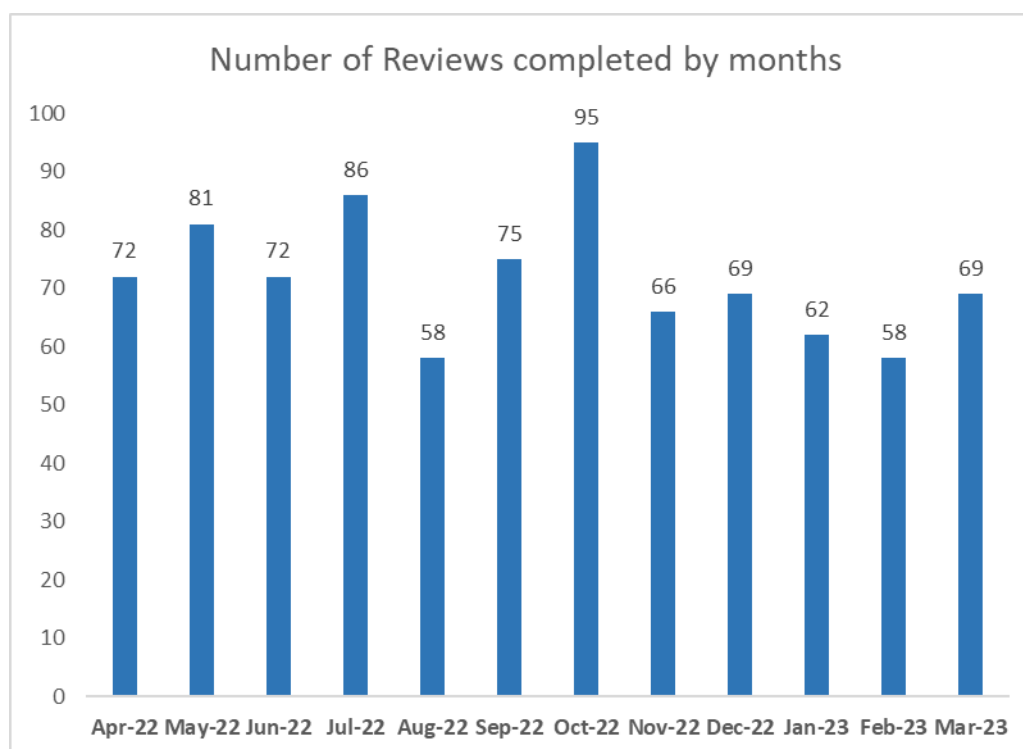
7.6 The annual meeting between the Corporate Director, Children and Young People and IROs took place on 24 January 2023. IROs were updated on the continued drive to increase the number of permanent social work staff and the Department’s strategic priorities. The Corporate Director acknowledged that there had been staffing challenges faced in the Care Planning Service and highlighted that the recruitment and retention package had been extended to Care Planning staff to help improve workforce recruitment and retention and improve stability for Looked After Children in Brent.

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

8.1 The following information provides a summary of performance in 2022/23:

- 863 Reviews took place for 486 children, 62 reviews fewer than 2021-2022 (925 reviews).
- A total of 82% of reviews happened within statutory timescale. This is lower than in 2021/22 (88%) and in part due to a combination of staff turnover in Care Planning and high numbers of reviews in some months, which put pressure on resources. This is an area of improvement focus for 2023/24.
- On average there were 72 reviews chaired each month with peaks of 86 in July 2022 and 95 in October 2022. Less busy months were August 2022 and February 2023 (58 reviews).

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



## 9.0 Attendance and participation of children

- 9.1 Full participation of children in their review meetings is strong focus of IROs following the Ofsted ILACS (Feb 2023). IROs are considering children's active participation in their reviews in more creative ways to takes participation beyond the child's voice, to less formal reviews that facilitate the greatest opportunity for participation. For example, a recent review took place that was a birthday party for an 18 year old, celebrating her successes and ambitions for her future. Improvement work includes looking a social pedagogy approaches and integrating these approaches into reviews.
- 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 (520 or 60%) attended their review and spoke for themselves. This is a slight reduction from 62% the previous year. The Ofsted ILAC inspection (February 2023) noted that we need to improve direct participation of children and young people in their reviews, The IRO is key to achieving this and increasing direct participation of children in LAC reviews is an area of practice improvement focus.



**Table 7: Participation types**

Participation Types	Description of codes	Number of children	% of children
PN0	Child aged under 4 at the time of the review	145	17%
PN1	Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself (Attendance).	521	60%
PN2	Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf.	3	0%
PN3	Child attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) (Attendance symbols)	1	0%
PN4	Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself	5	1%
PN5	Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her (Views represented by advocate or independent reviewing officer (IRO) through texting	125	14%
PN6	Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium (Texting the chair	48	6%
PN7	Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	15	2%
Grand Total		863	100%

## 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 has commissioned Advocacy Services provided by Coram Voice since April 2021 for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. The majority of advocacy requests related to children and young people's concerns in the following areas:

- Concerns about the social worker or personal advisor
- Housing/homelessness
- Complaints – non completion of assessment of kinship carers/pathway plans etc
- Finance, benefits and debt.

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 2022/23, Coram Voice provided a total of 687 hours of advocacy support to 67 children and young people. Coram Voice provide a quarterly report that is shared with IROs at the IRO meeting. IROs also recommend advocacy for those young people who they feel would benefit from the service.

## **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.
- 11.4 The Ofsted ILACS inspection (February 2023) noted that most IROs monitor the progress of children's plans well between looked after reviews to ensure that actions are progressed. Following on from the Ofsted ILACS an audit was undertaken of reviews and mid way reviews and as a result, revised templates for completing mid-way reviews have been developed and shared with IROs.

## **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. Feedback from advocacy services raises no concerns in respect of IROs and a focus group of care experienced young people were complimentary about their IROs when meeting with Ofsted in the recent inspection.
- 12.2 In 2022/23 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. The Ofsted ILACS inspection February 2023 noted that 'While many children are actively and purposefully helped to participate in their reviews, too many children do not directly attend'. As previously mentioned, this is an area of focus.

## **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 professional 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 There has been a small decrease in the number of escalations in 2022/23 compared to the previous year. In 2022/23 there were 51 escalations initiated by IROs compared to 55 escalations in 2021/22. 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
  - No Review Papers completed by Social Worker.
- 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 Corporate Director and no escalations to CAFCASS. 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 2023/2024**

Ofsted ILACS inspection (February 2023) stated:

Most independent reviewing officers (IROs) monitor the progress of children's plans well between looked after reviews to ensure that actions are progressed. IROs write letters to children following their reviews. These letters are not consistently of good quality and a small number are not routinely shared with children, their carers or families. While many children are actively and purposefully helped to participate in their reviews, too many children do not directly attend. For these children, the decisions and plans made at the review are made for them and not with them.

This feedback has informed the improvement planning for the IRO service for 2023/24. The key areas of focus are as follows:

1. Improve the attendance of children and young people in care at their reviews from the current 60% to 70% in 2023/24. This will be achieved through more proactive monitoring of direct participation and exploration of creative ways to engage young people in their reviews. Review forms will be implemented in 2023/24 so that IROs specify how young people have participated in reviews. Line managers will oversee these figures to creatively consider how direct participation can be achieved in future LAC Reviews.
2. The quality of information provided to children and young people following their reviews will be improved to ensure these are consistently written in age appropriate and child friendly language. Exemplars of best practice minutes/letters to young people will be developed and circulated. Line managers will dip sampling the records of reviews to drive improvement.
3. The quality assurance and performance reporting around mid-way reviews and participation will be strengthened. The midway review format has been changed to improve qualitative information and performance team have devised a reporting structure for management to review and track progress.
4. There will be increased supervision of commissioned IROs provided by Aidhour to help maintain consistency and maintain a qualitative service to Looked After Children & Young People.

An action plan is in place to track improvements and impact. The Head of Service, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, is meeting regularly with Aidhour management to review progress.

**Footnote 1: Ethnicity Codes**

**White includes** White –British, White-Cornish, White-English, WhiteScottish, 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)

**Report Sign-off:**

*Nigel Chapman*

Corporate Director Children and Young People