	<p align="center">Corporate Parenting Committee 14 October 2024</p>
	<p align="center">Report from the Corporate Director of Children and Young People</p>
	<p align="center">Lead Cabinet Member: Cllr Gwen Grahl</p>
<p align="center">Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2023/24</p>	

Wards Affected:	N/A
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the duration of the meeting, on the grounds that the attendance of representatives from the council's Children in Care council, necessitated the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 2, Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, of the Act, namely: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.
List of Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	None
Contact Officer(s): <small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>	Palvinder Kudhail Director, Early Help and Social Care Palvinder.Kudhail@brent.gov.uk Sonya Kalyniak Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Sonya.Kalyniak@brent.gov.uk Sabine Kadhaya Interim Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing Sabine.Kadhaya@brent.gov.uk

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Annual IRO Report is prepared by the Safeguarding and Reviewing 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 Recommendation(s)

2.1 Corporate Parenting Committee to note the contents of the report including priorities for 2024/25 (see section 3.47).

3.0 Detail

3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

The IRO Service contributes to the Brent Borough Plan under the following priorities:

- The best start in life
- A healthier Brent
- Prosperity and stability

3.2 Background

3.3 The IRO function sits within the Safeguarding and Reviewing Service. This service consists of:

- A Service Manager
- Two full time IROs and 12 IROs commissioned via Aidhour, an independent agency
- Five Child Protection Advisors
- One LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer)
- One Contextual Safeguarding Lead.

3.4 Aidhour has been commissioned to provide IROs for Brent for the past 25 years, with the current contract coming to an end on 30 September 2024. Historically, the high level of retention of IROs has led to continuity of IRO input for many of our Looked After Children. Aidhour are now experiencing recruitment and retention issues. As there has been an increased IRO staff changes within Aidhour combined with an increased cost, funding has been identified to establish a further two in-house IRO posts. In 2024/25, two in-house IROs will be appointed to bring more consistency in IRO and practice for looked after children and reduce Aidhour cost. There is currently an evaluation of a tender to appoint a new and revised contract from 1 October 2024 for additional IRO support.

3.5 All Aidhour IROs are experienced qualified social workers who are Disclosure and Barring Service checked and registered with Social Work England. In some instances, the IROs have been the most consistent and trusted person in the child's life. There are currently 14 IROs in Brent, including two permanent IROs, with representation of male and female IROs (6 males and 8 females). The ethnicity of the IROs is partially reflective of the diverse population of Brent's Looked After Children (LAC).

Table 1: IRO Ethnicity

IRO Ethnicity	Number
White British	7
White Other	1
Black or Black British	4
Asian or Asian British	2

3.6 Legal context and purpose of the service

3.7 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.

3.8 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.

3.9 Update on priorities for 2023/24

3.10 Improve the attendance of children and young people in care at their reviews in 2023/24.

Complete and ongoing. The attendance of looked after children, above the age of four years, at their reviews has increased to 76% for 2023/2024 compared to 73% in 2022/23. Direct participation in LAC Reviews is a standing agenda item at

the bi-monthly IRO meetings to develop more creative ways for children to participate in their reviews. This includes having more activity-based reviews with a clear child focused agenda. An IRO engagement handbook has been created and shared with IROs. There are many good practice examples of IROs engaging with children in a child focussed way. For example, one IRO had a conversation over a game of chess before a review and another IRO went for a bike ride with an autistic child. Tools being used include a “tree of life exercise” or other activities that help the IRO understand the child’s world and their lived experience.

3.11 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.

Complete and ongoing. Dip sampling has taken place of looked after children review letters and has shown that there is an improvement in how the letters are written in more child friendly/developmentally appropriate ways. Individual feedback has been provided to all IROs, highlighting the use of complex terms/language. Activities are taking place at the IRO meetings to consider the more simplistic use of language in discussion with children. Additionally, best practice examples and re-phrased summaries have been shared with all IROs to further improve the language used.

3.12 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.

Complete and ongoing. Monthly data is reviewed by the Service Manager and shared with Aidhour to monitor the IRO footprint on case records. The recording of midway reviews is carefully monitored by the Service Manager and Aidhour, which has led to an improvement of midway reviews being recorded. The performance data for the permanent IROs is further explored in their individual supervision, therefore providing further scrutiny.

3.13 There will be increased supervision of commissioned IROs provided by Aidhour to help maintain consistency and maintain a qualitative service to Looked After Children and Young People.

Complete. Aidhour managers have been actively involved in service development work with a greater overview of the work the IRO associates are carrying out. Regular IRO meetings focus on the quality of work and setting expectations by providing best practice examples. Regular dip sampling is used to ensure that there is a more standardised way of capturing the minutes of LAC reviews.

Anonymised case study: excerpts of minutes of a LAC Review

Dear Alise

It was lovely to meet you for the first time at your aunt's home.

I am writing the minutes of your looked after child review in a letter to you, so that you can have a record of what we talked about.

Your social worker explained that you were placed with your aunt under Section 20 of the Children Act, 1989. This is an agreement with your mother for you to live away from home with family until your social worker is able to complete assessments of your mum and dad. Your social worker is worried that your parents are struggling to meet your needs and keep you safe.

Your social worker explained that the plan is for you to stay with your aunt for now until all the assessments are complete.

When I asked you how you felt about the plan, you shrugged. Thank you for showing me all your pictures and colour books. You did get a bit upset when we spoke about your mum.

Your aunt is happy to look after you. She said that it's been quite difficult for you to be away from mum which is perfectly understandable.

I agree that you are best placed with your aunt until all the assessments are completed.

I made some recommendations that needs to be followed up and these will be reviewed at your next review.

It is important that you know who to contact if you are not happy with anything or want to make a complaint about any aspects of your care. Here is how you can contact me.

3.14 Profile of Looked after Children

- 3.15 As of 31 March 2024 Brent had 307 children in care compared to 319 children on 31 March 2023, a decrease of 3.8%. This represents 42 children in care per 10,000 children compared to the England rate of 71 per 10,000 head of the child population, a decrease in rate by 2 from the previous year (44). A full profile of Looked After Children was presented to the Corporate Parenting

Committee in July 2024 in the LAC Annual report. This includes including numbers, gender, age, ethnicity, legal status and placement type. This report is available

here:

<https://democracy.brent.gov.uk/documents/s143530/8.%20Annual%20Corporate%20Parenting%20Report%202023-24.pdf>

3.16 Quality assurance and monitoring

3.17 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.

3.18 The Safeguarding and Reviewing Service Manager oversees the work of Aidhour IROs through practice development meetings, quarterly contract monitoring meetings, reviewing of LAC performance data 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
- The Team Manager of the Performance Team
- Multi Agency partners
- CAFCASS.

3.19 IROs ensure monitoring and scrutiny outside the statutory LAC reviews, via Quality Assurance activity such as midway reviews, escalations and consultations with social work teams. Dip sampling has shown that some IROs leave a strong footprint on the children's case files, ensuring that they have a clear overview of the child's care plan and journey; however, quality assurance work demonstrates that the IRO footprint needs to be strengthened for consistency across all children in care. IROs also work closely with Child Protection Advisors (CPAs) when there might be a period of dual registration when LAC and child protection processes might run concurrently for short periods of time. CPAs attending LAC reviews prior to ending child protection plans will ensure that all of the children's needs are fully met via their care plan.

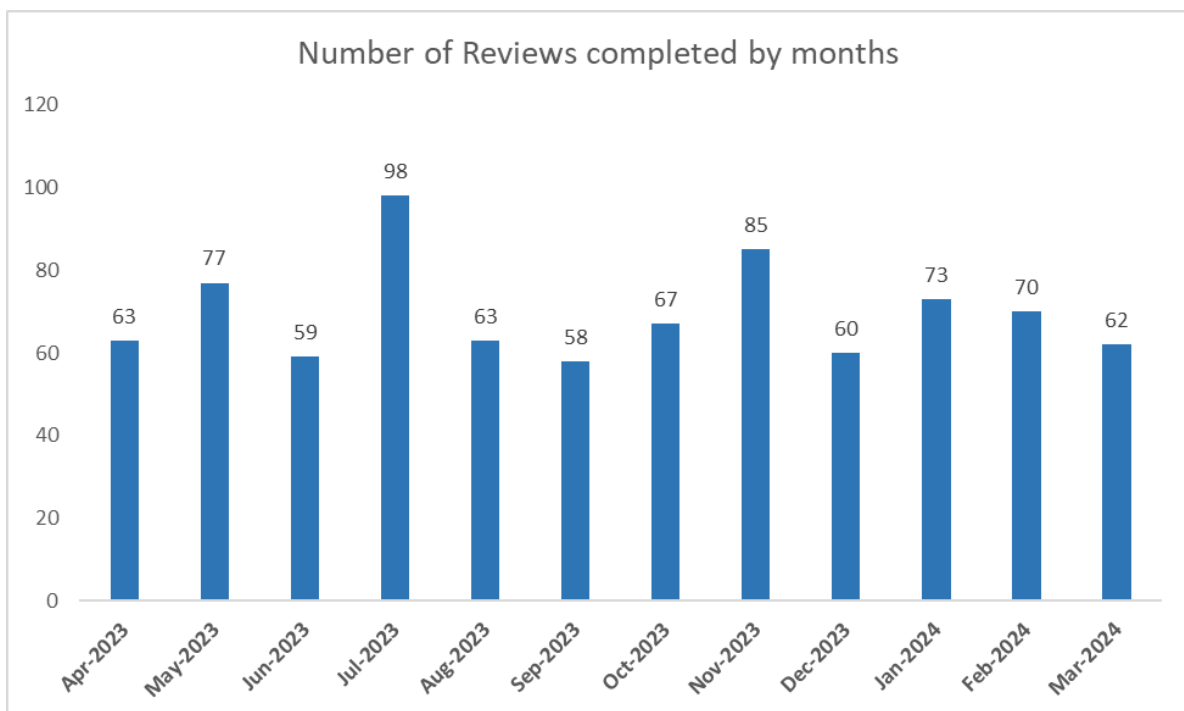
3.20 The annual meeting between the Corporate Director, Children and Young People and IROs took place on 4 March 2024, when the department's strategic priorities were discussed. Additionally, IROs were updated about semi-independent inspection processes starting in autumn 2024 and that a 4-bed Children's Home in Wembley has been purchased.

3.21 Performance of the IRO service

3.22 The following information provides a summary of performance in 2023/24:

- 835 LAC Reviews took place for 458 children, 28 reviews fewer than in 2022-2023 (863 reviews).
- A total of 83% of reviews happened within statutory timescale. This is higher than in 2022/23 (82%) and a continuing focus of monitoring and challenge. This is an area of improvement focus for 2024/25.
- On average there were 70 reviews chaired each month with peaks of 98 in July 2023 and 85 in November 2023. Less busy months were June and September 2023.

Table 6: Number of reviews per month



3.23 Attendance and participation of children

3.24 Continuing work is focusing on how LAC reviews can encourage greater participation of children of all ages. LAC reviews enable children to have their voice heard and choose who they would like to attend the meeting. Children are encouraged to set their own agenda and when possible lead their own review meetings. Creative resources have been shared with the IROs and two sessions about how meetings can be less adult led, have taken place. A dip

sample audit has shown that children attend the majority of their reviews in person or if this is not possible the IROs will make every attempt to gather the children's views prior to the meeting. However, at times it is not possible for children to attend as they might have additional needs, or they might choose not to attend the meeting.

3.25 Children are able to participate in their reviews in a number of ways (please see the participation types in table 7 below). The majority of children and young people aged over four years (528 or 76%) attended their review and spoke for themselves. This is an increase from 73% in the previous year. As noted in the Ofsted ILAC inspection, the direct participation of children and young people in their reviews is an ongoing focus and is being addressed via various measures as mentioned above.

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	142	17%
PN1	Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself (Attendance).	528	63%
PN2	Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf.	5	1%
PN3	Child attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) (Attendance symbols)	4	0%
PN4	Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself	4	0%
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)	104	12%
PN6	Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium (Texting the chair)	41	5%
PN7	Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	7	1%
Grand Total		835	100%

3.26 Advocacy

3.27 Advocacy is an important part of empowering Looked After Children and Young People. Brent has commissioned Coram Voice since 2021 to provide advocacy and a befriending service to Looked After Children and Care Leavers. A dip sample audit confirmed that Coram Voice is mentioned at all LAC review meetings and how children and young people can access the service. In total children and young people have raised 275 advocacy issues with Coram Voice in 2023/24. The main requests related to the following:

- Concerns about SW / PA (28)
- Complaint (26)
- Support at meetings (24)
- Housing (23)
- Education, Training & Employment (18)
- Request to move placement - other (8)
- Request to move placement - to move to more independent living (8)

3.28 Coram Voice are contracted to deliver 500 advocacy hours per year for a target of 60 children and young people in Brent, which varies based on the individual need. Coram Voice continue to exceed the contracted hours. The current service specification allows for an average of 5 to 8.33 hours of advocacy work for each child or young person's case. In 2023/24 Coram Voice provided 879 hours of advocacy support to 89 children and young people (57 issues-based advocacy and 32 child protection advocacy). This led to a budget pressure in the Safeguarding and Reviewing Service.

3.29 Quality of Care Planning and progress between reviews

3.30 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.

3.31 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.

3.32 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.

3.33 Escalations and Practice Alerts

- 3.34 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 enable 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.
- 3.35 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. The escalation policy has now been updated to simplify the escalation process.
- 3.36 In 2023/24 IROs raised 34 escalations, compared to 51 in the previous year. The following main concerns were raised:
- The lack of an available care/pathway plan at the time of the review meeting
 - Placement Planning Meetings/Personal Education Plans/LAC Health Assessment meetings being out of timescales
 - Social Worker conduct during the meeting
 - Delay in referrals/actions from the LAC review meeting
 - Case recording issues
 - The lack of response from Social Work teams.
- 3.37 When concerns are raised by IROs, these concerns are generally responded to in a timely way. However, some concerns need to be tracked and escalated by the Service Manager. 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 Director, Early Help and Social Care or 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.

3.38 Priorities for 2024/2025

Priorities to improve the IRO service for 2024/25 are as follows:

- Recruit to two new in-house IRO posts to build consistency for children and reduce Aidhour cost
- Implement a new contract with a commissioned provider by 1 October 2024
- Continue to improve timeliness of LAC reviews taking place within statutory timescales by working with teams to ensure referrals are received on time and closer scrutiny of performance data
- Continue to increase the direct participation of children and young people at their LAC reviews to 80% through more creative ways of working to encourage child/young people led meetings.

4.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

4.1 Looked after children, their family and carers are routinely consulted as part of LAC Review processes. Care experienced young people support with the recruitment of IROs.

4.2 Children and young people provide feedback through discussions with their social worker, IRO, or their carers SSW, Looked After Children Reviews, written feedback for Annual Foster Carer Reviews, Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, Care in Action/Participation activities and Brent Care Journeys.

5.0 Financial Considerations

5.1 There are currently no financial implications arising from this report.

6.0 Legal Considerations

6.1 There are currently no legal considerations arising from this report.

7.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

7.1 Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) considerations are within the body of this report.

8.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

8.1 There are no climate change or environmental considerations.

9.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

9.1 There are no human resource or property considerations.

10.0 Communication Considerations

10.1 At this stage there are not any communication considerations.

Report sign off:

Nigel Chapman

Corporate Director Children and Young People