	<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>  14 July 2025
	<b>Report from the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Community Development</b>
	<b>Lead Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools - Cllr Gwen Grahl</b>
<b>Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2024/25</b>	

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	N/A
<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>	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.
<b>List of Appendices:</b>	None
<b>Background Papers:</b>	None
<b>Contact Officer(s):</b> (Name, Title, Contact Details)	Palvinder Kudhail Director, Early Help and Social Care <a href="mailto:Palvinder.Kudhail@brent.gov.uk">Palvinder.Kudhail@brent.gov.uk</a>  Sonya Kalyniak Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance <a href="mailto:Sonya.Kalyniak@brent.gov.uk">Sonya.Kalyniak@brent.gov.uk</a>  Sabine Kadhaya Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing <a href="mailto:Sabine.Kadhaya@brent.gov.uk">Sabine.Kadhaya@brent.gov.uk</a>

## 1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Annual Independent Reviewing Officer (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 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 2025/26 (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
  - Four full-time, permanent IROs
  - Four IROs commissioned via Aidhour, an independent agency
  - Six Child Protection Advisors (covering five roles)
  - 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. Aidhour has been successful in securing a new contract in October 2024. This is a reduced contract compared to previous years, as two permanent IROs have been recruited. Aidhour also carries out all annual Brent Foster Carer reviews. As the majority of IRO activity now sits with the in-house IROs and the current Aidhour IROs have consistently been working in Brent, all IROs contribute to providing stability and continuity for Brent Looked After Children (LAC).
- 3.5 The revised Aidhour contract focuses on the older (16/17) looked after children with the younger LAC cohort being supported by the in-house IROs. This provides greater stability to children who are likely to be looked after for longer. During a transition period, Aidhour allocations were moved to the two new permanent IROs. This was based on children's needs, relationships with IROs and stability within their placements.
- 3.6 All Aidhour IROs are experienced qualified social workers who are registered with Social Work England and Disclosure and Barring Service checked. There are currently 8 IROs operating in Brent with representation of male and female

IROs (2 males and 6 females). The ethnicity of the IROs is reflective of the diverse population of Brent's LAC.

**Table 1: IRO Ethnicity**

<b>IRO Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number</b>
White British	<b>2</b>
White Other	<b>2</b>
Black or Black British	<b>2</b>
Asian or Asian British	<b>2</b>

### **3.7 Legal context and purpose of the service**

**3.8** 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
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

**3.9** 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.

### **3.10 Update on priorities for 2024/25**

**3.11 Priority 1:** Recruit to two new in-house IRO posts to build consistency for children and reduce Aidhour cost.

**Complete.** Two permanent IROs have joined the service and are now settled in their roles. The regular direct supervision of the two additional IROs allows for greater scrutiny of both the qualitative and quantitative performance of the IROs, which has a positive impact on the LAC population.

**3.12 Priority 2:** Implement a new contract with a commissioned provider by 1 October 2024

**Complete.** The new smaller contract has been awarded to Aidhour after a competitive procurement process. The contract's main focus is the older LAC population of 16-year-old plus young people, with approximately 60 to 70 children and young people allocated to Aidhour IROs.

**3.13 Priority 3:** 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.

**Complete and ongoing.** Regular reports are run to ensure that all LAC have an allocated IRO to ensure the timely completion of reviews. Monthly LAC reports are shared with Aidhour colleagues to follow up the timely completion of reviews. The total number of LAC reviews completed in time scales in 2024/25 was 85%. This is higher than in 2023/24 (83%) and continues to be an area of development for 2025/26. Individual supervision with in-house IROs enables further scrutiny of performance data. Additionally, a dashboard specific to LAC data is currently being enhanced, which will assist in tracking performance data.

**3.14 Priority 4:** 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.

**Complete and ongoing.** In the period April 2024 to March 2025, 798 LAC reviews were carried out. Of these, 114 reviews (14%) were for children four years and under. Of the remaining 683 reviews, 76% of children directly attended and participated in their LAC Reviews. In total, 98.4% of children and young people either directly or indirectly participated in their reviews. Further work with IROs has been carried out and resources shared to continue to encourage more creative ways of engaging children and young people's participation. IROs are taking children and young people out if there is a need for a more informal conversation in the child's preferred setting. Additionally, IROs are encouraged to consider closure activities with the older young people, as part of their final review, in order to celebrate all of their achievements.

**Anonymised case study: Anonymised letter to a child following a LAC Review**

*You joined your review and contributed throughout. It was good to meet you for the first time, A. You confidently expressed your wishes and feelings – thank you for doing this!*

*You expressed you really like living with your sister B. You are happy with the time that you spend with your mother and said you do not want to see your father at this time. You shared that your father has let you down by not seeing you consistently in the past.*

*You showed me your bedroom after your review, and we spent a few minutes speaking alone. You did not have any issues you wished to discuss with me. Your room was neat and tidy. You showed me the Lego that you have built which is displayed nicely on your shelves – this is really impressive A! You also showed me the 3D comic characters on your wall – I have not seen these before – they are really cool! You like drawing and have some drawings you have completed within the lounge. You are talented at drawing.*

*I explained the role of an advocate and offered you this service. You informed me that this has previously been discussed with you and you do not wish to access this currently. I apologised and explained I need to check with you at each review, in case you change your mind! If you do, you can let C or me know and we can make the necessary referral.*

### **3.15 Quality assurance and monitoring**

3.16 Caseloads for full-time IROs are around 60 to 65 children in accordance with national guidance and Ofsted recommendations. Social work staff value the expertise and knowledge of IROs, who provide guidance and scrutiny on care planning. IROs complete midway meetings between reviews, liaise with professionals involved with children, including the guardian ad litem in court proceedings and ensure that the children's agreed care plans are being implemented.

3.17 The work of the Aidhour IROs is being monitored by the Safeguarding and Reviewing Service Manager through practice development meetings, quarterly contract monitoring meetings, reviewing of LAC performance data and audits, and individual supervision and discussions. Practice development meetings are 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 Head of LAC and Permanency
- The Head of the Virtual School
- The Head of Safeguarding and QA
- Service managers in LAC and Permanency, including those responsible for Leaving Care, Fostering and Adoption and the Service Manager for Children with Disabilities
- Brent Youth Justice Service (YJS)
- 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
- (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS))

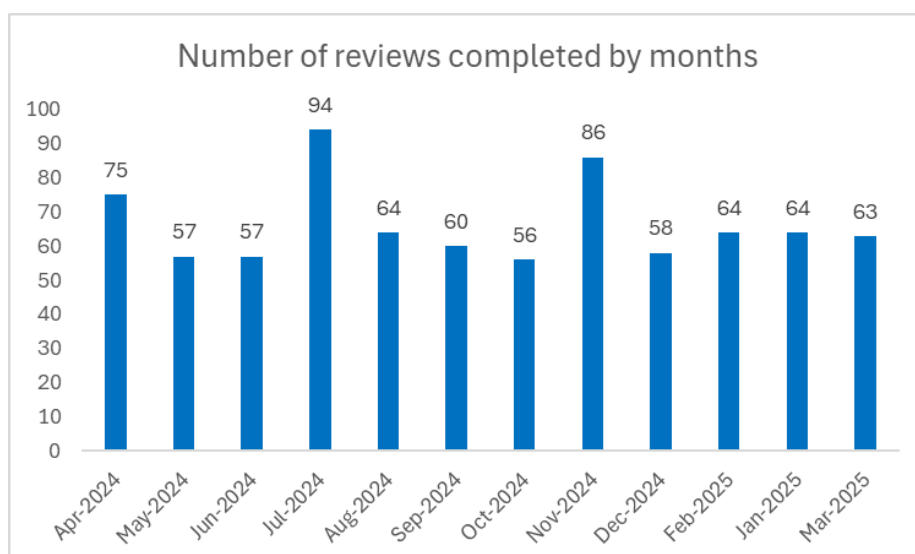
3.18 IROs ensure monitoring and scrutiny outside the statutory LAC reviews, via Quality Assurance activity such as midway reviews, escalations and consultations with social work teams. Dip sampling of case file records has shown that IROs are actively involved in discussions about children and young people. It was evident in individual discussions with all IROs as part of the transfer process to the newly recruited permanent IROs, that the IROs know their allocated children and young people very well. A new midway template has now been agreed to capture pertinent information between reviews. The process of de-planning looked after children from child protection plans, when children are dual registered, is now also working well, with the Child Protection Advisors being invited to the first LAC review to ensure the children's needs are fully met as part of their care plans.

### 3.19 Performance of the IRO service

3.20 The following information provides a summary of performance in 2024/25:

- 798 LAC Reviews took place for 440 children, 37 reviews fewer than in 2022-2023 (835 reviews).
- A total of 85% of reviews happened within statutory timescale. This is higher than in 2023/24 (83%) and continues to be an area of improvement for 2025/26. The IROs have raised issues such as professional and parent availability, late referrals and difficulties of re-scheduling the reviews as reasons why reviews are not taking place within timescales.
- On average there were 66 reviews chaired each month with peaks of 94 in July 2024 and 86 in November 2024. Less busy months were May, June, October and December 2024.

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



### 3.21 Attendance and participation of children

- 3.22 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 are a continuing agenda items at IRO meetings. A dip sample audit was completed by the Service Manager in May 2025, where sixteen allocations across all IROs were reviewed. This audit has shown that children attended 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 due to complex additional needs or choosing not to attend the meeting.
- 3.23 Children are able to participate in their reviews in a number of ways (see the participation types in table 7 below). The majority of children and young people aged over four years (510/684 or 76%) attended their review and spoke for themselves. This is similar to the previous year (77%). In addition, 22% of LAC aged 5 and over indirectly participated by attending with an advocate, instructing an advocate or a trusted person to convey their views or sharing their views with their IRO in advance. Only 2% of children did not share their views as part of their LAC Review. As noted in the 2023 Ofsted ILACS 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. The IROs provided the some of the challenges to direct participation in LAC Reviews including despite preparation and support, some children choose not to attend their reviews and some LAC are missing/absent from placement at the time of the review. Some reviews are for children with additional needs, and although the IRO will meet with the child, an advocate or their foster carer communicates their views.

**Table 7: Participation types**

<b>Participation Types</b>	<b>Description of codes</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>% of children</b>	<b>% of children above 4 years (total 683)</b>
PN0	Child aged under 4 at the time of the review	114	14.3%	N/A
PN1	Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself (Attendance).	519	65.1%	76.0%
PN2	Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf.	14	1.7%	2.1%
PN3	Child attends and conveys his or her	4	0.5%	0.6%

	view symbolically (non-verbally)			
PN4	Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself	3	0.4%	0.4%
PN5	Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her	108	13.6%	15.8%
PN6	Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	24	3.0%	3.5%
PN7	Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	11	1.4%	1.6%
Grand Total		797	100%	100%

### 3.24 Advocacy

3.25 Advocacy is a statutory requirement, entitling all looked after children and care leavers to independent advice. In Brent the advocacy service is provided by Coram Voice, who have been delivering an advocacy and a befriending service since 2021. All IROs are now fully aware of both the advocacy and befriending service, with advocacy being offered to/discussed with LAC at reviews. Due to an increase in demand in 2024/25, it was agreed that the annual provision of 500 hours of advocacy was not sufficient according to demand, hence there has been a contractual increase to 900 advocacy hours per year to manage the need in the most cost-effective way.

3.26 Coram Voice provided 43 children with child protection advocacy and 81 LAC and Care Leavers with issues-based advocacy; In 2024-25, the total number of advocacy hours provided was 975, exceeding the service specification by 75 hours across the year. Demand for the advocacy service in Brent continues to grow year on year. In total, young people have raised 259 advocacy issues; the table below highlights the top issues:

1. Housing	27
2. Education, Training & Employment – access to	19
3. Concerns about Social Workers/Personal Advisors	19
4. Support at meetings	17
5. Complaint	15

Coram Voice uses an outcome questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the intervention to establish what the children and young people want to achieve. The analysis between the two questionnaires shows that, of the children who have completed the exit questionnaire, their most positive



indicators are their improvements around relationships, wellbeing and motivation.

Coram Voice is also commissioned to provide an Independent Visitor Service. In 2024/25, 17 young people were supported with this service. The contract target is to support 14 CYP. The service was operating a waiting list; however, this has now been closed to avoid prolonged waiting for appropriate matching. In 2024/25 532.6 hours of face to face and phone contact took place. There has now also been the introduction of memory books, which CYP create together with their independent visitors.

Learning from themes from advocacy and the Independent Visitor Service and evidencing impact of sharing these with IROs and to the LAC and Permanency Service is an area of development in 2025/26.

### **Feedback from children and young people using the advocacy service:**

*"[The Advocate] always listens to me. The most helpful thing about having an advocate was someone going to the meetings for me. Having an advocate is great"* We asked this child if they had any suggestions of what could be improved, and they said: *"more activities together and more time to do them."*

*"It's nice to have feedback and to be heard."*

*"Good to have you, because you make sure I have what I'm entitled to."*

*"I am happy with the plans now and know how I will be supported even after I am 18."*

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

3.28 The IROs' main responsibility is to monitor and scrutinise the quality-of-care plans. Work with IROs has been undertaken to ensure that all review reports (in the form of letters to children) are written in child friendly and easily accessible language. Children and young people are supported to contribute to their care plan and receive their own copy of their care plans.

3.29 In order to regularly monitor the progress of the implementation of care plans, mid-way reviews are being carried out with the social worker. A dip sample audit carried out by the SQA Service Manager in May 2025 of 17 children's and young people's case files has shown that IROs have a strong footprint on the case files, liaising with a variety to professionals, involved with LAC. The audit also showed that:

- all the reviews took place within statutory time frames
- meeting minutes indicated that all LAC directly and indirectly participated in their reviews
- most meetings were held in person
- compared to last year's dip sample audit, it was noted that the letter to the child (review meeting minutes) are now written in a more succinct

and shorter style. - most reviews go ahead without an updated care or pathway plan available prior or at the time of the review, which needs to be addressed.

- the use of escalation processes, supervision and IRO meetings, enables the Service Manager to be clear about practice issues

The supervision of permanent IROs allows for individual case discussions and an additional layer of management oversight.

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. These details are also included in all review minutes, enabling children to contact their IROs directly to discuss any concerns.

- 3.30 IROs ensure that young people, above the age of 16 years, have a Pathway Plan, which ensures their transition needs to adulthood are met. 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 to avoid children being subject to dual processes. The importance of focusing on young people's access to their health histories as part of their last LAC reviews, has been explored repeatedly at several IRO meetings to ensure that young people understand the responsibility meeting their own health needs as part of the transition process to adulthood.

### **3.31 Escalations and Practice Alerts**

- 3.32 One of the key functions of the statutory role of the IRO is to seek resolution to any problem or professional disagreement arising from the care planning process. It is a core part of their independent role to scrutinise practice and challenge the Local Authority to achieve good and timely outcomes for children. As all IROs have either been in post for a longer period of time or are permanent, they have built strong relationships with Social Work Teams to resolve issues quickly, without the need for significant escalation to Senior Managers. IROs will also highlight good social work practice to the Service Manager so that this can be shared with Senior Managers. However, IROs remain alert that their primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. There is regular reflection on how they balance both challenge and support the practice system.
- 3.33 The IRO Handbook, legislation and guidance around the planning for LAC 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. Since October 2024 an updated escalation policy has been put in place, to ensure that any

disagreements are resolved in a timely manner without the need to escalate to senior managers. 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 was still no agreement after 15 days, then the IRO may escalate concerns to CAFCASS.

3.34 In 2024/25 IROs raised 27 escalations, compared to 34 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 not regularly taking place
- Drift in PLO actions
- Outstanding financial payments
- Lack of educational provision over a longer period of time
- Unclear transition/care plans.

3.35 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. No cases were escalated to the Director, Early Help and Social Care or the Director of Children's Services. All IROs are being encouraged to utilise the escalation process to resolve matter, directly with the social work teams in the first instance. Should this not be possible, IROs will escalate matters to the Service Manager. 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. Additionally, there is now the new IRO Practice Manager in place, who will ensure the timely escalation and will have regular meetings with other Service Managers to discuss any difficulties and escalations.

### **3.36 Priorities for 2025/2026**

3.37 As part of Phase 1 of the Early Help and Social Care Redesign, the role of IRO Practice Manager was established (beginning June 2025). This role is to supervise IRO, manage the Aidhour contract, provide greater oversight of the work of IROs and lead practice improvement work.

3.38 Priorities to improve the IRO service for 2025/26 are as follows:

- Continuing drive to make LAC reviews more child led, encourage more active participation and make this a creative experience for the child
- Ensuring that at least 90% of LAC reviews take place within statutory time frames

- Timely escalation of all occasions where a care plan/pathway plan is not available prior to the LAC review
- Robust tracking of all escalations until resolution, with oversight by the new IRO Practice Manager role
- Learning from themes from advocacy and the Independent Visitor Service and evidencing impact of sharing these with IROs and the LAC and Permanency Service
- Consider the recruitment of an additional permanent IRO as part of Phase 2 of the Early Help and Social Care redesign.

#### **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. Consideration will be given to recruiting to a fifth IRO post as part of the Early Help and Social Care Redesign. If so, this will need to be within the current budget of the service.

#### **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, Young People and Community Development