

	Corporate Parenting Committee 14 July 2026
	Report from the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Community Development
	Lead Cabinet Member for Childrens' Services, Employment and Climate Action - Cllr Jake Rubin
Independent Reviewing Officer, Advocacy and Independent Visiting Annual Report 2025/26	

Wards Affected:	N/A
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	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): (Name, Title, Contact Details)	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 Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing Sabine.Kadhaya@brent.gov.uk

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 2026/27.

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
- 1 part time IRO Practice Manager/IRO
- Four full-time, permanent IROs
- Five IROs commissioned via Aidhour, an independent agency
- Six Child Protection Advisors (covering five full time roles)
- One LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer)

- 3.4 Aidhour has been commissioned to provide Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) for Brent for the past 26 years and secured a new contract in October 2024. This contract represents a reduction compared to previous years, reflecting the recruitment of two permanent in-house IROs. In addition to their IRO provision, Aidhour continues to undertake all annual Brent foster carer reviews. As the majority of IRO activity sits within the in-house team and given that the majority of Aidhour IROs have consistently worked in Brent, there remains a strong level of stability and continuity for Brent's Looked After Children. More recently, one Aidhour IRO left the service and has been replaced by two new Aidhour IROs. While this has resulted in a change of IRO for a small number of children, the vast majority have continued to benefit from having the same IRO, maintaining overall continuity of relationships.

- 3.5 The revised 2024 Aidhour contract focuses on older (16/17) looked after children with the younger CLA cohort being supported by the in-house IROs. This provides greater stability to children who are likely to be looked after for longer.

- 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 10 IROs operating in Brent (including the IRO manager) with representation of male and female IROs (3 males and 7 females). The ethnicity of the IROs is reflective of the diverse population of Brent's LAC.

Table 1: IRO Ethnicity

IRO Ethnicity	Number
White British	2
White Other	3
Black or Black British	3
Asian or Asian British	2

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 (IRO) Handbook*, which provides statutory guidance for IROs and local authorities. This was implemented in April 2011 alongside the revised Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and associated guidance. While subsequent legislation, including the Children and Social Work Act 2017, has strengthened the wider corporate parenting framework, the core statutory role and functions of the IRO have remained consistent.

3.9 The statutory duties of the IRO, as set out in section 25B(1) of the Children Act 1989, are to:

- Monitor the performance by the local authority of its functions in relation to the child's case
- Participate in any review of the child's case
- Ensure that the child's wishes and feelings are ascertained and given due consideration by the local authority

3.10 The core functions of the IRO include:

- Ensuring that the child's care plan accurately reflects their current needs and that all planned actions are consistent with the local authority's statutory responsibilities. In line with the corporate parenting principles set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the local authority is expected to act as a reasonable and responsible parent would for any child in its care.
- Providing independent oversight of the local authority's performance as a corporate parent, including identifying areas of drift, delay or poor practice, as well as recognising positive practice. This includes identifying themes or patterns that may impact on the quality of care provided to Looked After Children. Where broader service concerns are identified, the IRO has a responsibility to escalate these to senior managers in accordance with the IRO Handbook.

4.0 Update on priorities for 2025/26

4.1 **Priority 1:** Continuing drive to make LAC reviews more child led, encourage more active participation and make this a creative experience for the child

4.2 **Update:** IROs continue to prioritise child-led LAC reviews, with a strong focus on supporting children and young people to participate meaningfully. Between April 2025 and April 2026, children and young people attended or contributed directly or indirectly to 673 of 829 LAC reviews (81%). Of the 156 children who did not participate, 134 were under the age of four.

4.3 IROs maintain a careful balance when facilitating meaningful participation, ensuring that children's wishes and feelings are heard, understood, whilst fulfilling their statutory role in providing independent oversight and challenge.

- 4.4 Findings from the 2026 dip sample audit of IRO letters confirm that all IROs are actively seeking children's views and promoting participation, with good examples of creative approaches being used to engage children and young people of various ages. Where a small number of young people choose not to attend or participate directly, IROs consistently seek their views beforehand and make efforts to engage them in alternative, creative ways.
- 4.5 The 2026 IRO letter dip sample audit also demonstrated that for children under four, or for those unable to verbalise their wishes and feelings due to disability, IROs appropriately incorporate direct observations to ensure the child's experience is represented.
- 4.6 **Priority 2:** Ensuring that at least 90% of LAC reviews take place within statutory time frames
- 4.7 **Update:** In 2025/26, 86% of LAC reviews were completed within statutory timescales, representing a small improvement from 85% in 2024/25 (85% in 2023/24 and 83% in 2022/23). This reflects steady progress, although the target of 90% has not yet been achieved.
- 4.8 In October 2025, a LAC dashboard was introduced to strengthen oversight of review timeliness. Regular monitoring reports are now in place to ensure that all children have an allocated IRO, supporting the timely scheduling and completion of reviews. Monthly performance reports are also shared with Aidhour colleagues to support follow-up where delays are identified.
- 4.9 Analysis of late reviews indicates that delays are often linked to late IRO allocation requests (this process is currently under review) as well as unavoidable factors such as illness requiring rescheduling by IROs or social workers. Timeliness remains an area for further improvement in 2026/27.
- 4.10 Performance is subject to ongoing scrutiny through supervision with in-house IROs, and further enhancements to the LAC dashboard are expected to strengthen the tracking and management of LAC review performance.
- 4.11 **Priority 3:** Timely escalation of all occasions where a care plan/pathway plan is not available prior to the LAC review
- 4.12 **Update:** There is evidence that IROs are escalating concerns where care plans or pathway plans are not available prior to LAC reviews. However, to maintain oversight and avoid delay, reviews have proceeded rather than being cancelled.
- 4.13 In some instances, escalation has taken place informally outside of the formal IRO escalation process. This reflects IRO recognition that, following significant realignment of services in summer 2025, several social workers were new to care planning processes. As the realignment is now established, a clearer and more consistent approach is required.
- 4.14 From June 2026, strengthened guidance will be implemented to support IROs in the timely use of alerts and formal escalation processes where care plans or pathway plans are not available ahead of review. This will be a continued area of focus for 2026/27 to ensure robust oversight and compliance.

- 4.15 **Priority 4:** Robust tracking of all escalations until resolution, with oversight by the new IRO Practice Manager role.
- 4.16 **Update:** The IRO Practice Manager has worked in partnership with the Mosaic Development and Performance Team to implement a revised system for recording and managing IRO escalations. This system went live in December 2025 and ensures that all escalations are recorded and responded to within Mosaic. This has contributed to improvements in the timeliness and consistency of responses to IRO escalations.
- 4.17 A review of escalations in May 2026 identified a small number of process issues within Mosaic, which are currently being addressed to further strengthen the system. Plans are also in place to incorporate escalation tracking into the LAC dashboard, which will provide the IRO Practice Manager with enhanced oversight and the ability to monitor patterns and themes.
- 4.18 Ensuring timely and effective responses to IRO escalations remains a key priority for the IRO Practice Manager and will continue to be a focus for 2026/27.
- 4.19 **Priority 5:** Learning from themes from advocacy and the Independent Visitor Service and evidencing impact of sharing these with IROs and the LAC and Permanency Service
- 4.20 **Update:** The IRO Practice Manager has oversight of the Advocacy and Independent Visitor Services, attending quarterly review meetings and sharing key learning with the IRO Service through team meetings.
- 4.21 In June 2026, an overview report was completed following a review of advocacy (Coram) and the Independent Visitor Service, highlighting key themes and areas of learning based on young people's experiences.
- 4.22 While this has strengthened awareness within the IRO and LAC and Permanency Service, further development is required to ensure that this learning consistently informs practice and leads to measurable service and system improvements. This will be a continued area of focus for 2026/27, with an emphasis on evidencing the impact of changes made in response to the issues raised by children and young people.
- 4.23 **Priority 6:** Consider the recruitment of an additional permanent IRO as part of Phase 2 of the Early Help and Social Care redesign.
- 4.24 The IRO Practice Manager is currently developing a proposal to bring all IRO case holding in-house. This includes considering the potential impact on staffing, capacity and associated costs, alongside the implications for service delivery, continuity for children and young people, and the future use of commissioned IRO provision.
- 4.25 **2026/27 Priorities**
A number of the 2025/26 priorities have been carried forward into 2026/27. This reflects a period of significant service development, including service realignment, the introduction of a new IRO Practice Manager role, an Ofsted inspection, and the implementation of a new CLA/IRO dashboard. While these priorities remain ongoing,

there has been clear progress, with strengthened oversight, improved processes, and emerging outstanding practice. The continuation of these priorities into 2026/27 reflects a focus on embedding and sustaining these changes to ensure consistent and measurable impact for children and young people.

Case Example: **Anonymised letter to a child following a LAC Review**

Your social worker and I did not want your LAC review meeting to be heavy and focussed on it being more relational. I suggested we have a nice lunch/meal together; we came up with the idea of us chatting over a sip and paint activity with some of your favourite snacks (spicy Cheetos, Dr Pepper and deli meat).

It was a fun activity, but it was very evident that [the social worker] and I, were entering your territory. Whilst we were following the tutorial video, you free handed your painting, and it was beautiful. The rest of us tried our best and yours had resemblances of flowers 😊.

What was more poignant of today's meeting is that I got a little bit of insight to you as a person. You spoke about your dreams/ambitions for your future. You would like to pursue a course in the Arts and is looking at applying to [college]. You said that you originally considered becoming an interior designer, but you have developed a passion for tattooing and piercing and is looking at pursuing this as a career.

Thank you for allowing me, [social worker] and [carer] to have this time with you; you have been open, honest, and brave. I do not see you often, so I really appreciate how much you chose to share today. It was clear that you feel grounded and settled, living with [carer] and that's lovely to see. Like you, my hope is that you can stay with [carer] until you are eighteen years old and therefore with the support of the adults around you, I hope you are able to go into school more often.

6.0 Quality assurance and monitoring

- 6.1 The IRO Service was considered as part of two recent Ofsted inspections. During the Ofsted focused visit on the local authority's arrangements for children in care, the report states:

"Children in care benefit from improvements made to the independent reviewing officer (IRO) service since the last inspection. Increased IRO capacity and manageable workloads mean that IROs are better able to scrutinise children's plans robustly, preventing drift and delays in care planning and securing permanence. Most children participate in their reviews, and they receive carefully crafted letters confirming to them the outcome of the meeting. Children say that they know their IROs well and how to contact them if they need to. Mid-way reviews help to keep children's progress on track, and IROs escalate issues to tackle problems when identified. Managers are putting steps in place to improve the way the IRO 'footprint' is captured on children's records." [Ofsted focussed visit Nov 2025](#)

- 6.2 A full Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services took place in April/May 2026. The feedback about the IRO Service is as follows:

Children in care benefit from IROs who have exceptionally strong knowledge of them and their lived experiences, which supports thorough planning for children. Concerns are escalated effectively, guardians and advocacy services are involved, and children's progress is monitored closely through regular midway review conversations. IROs write sensitively to children about their journeys and the decisions being made for them, forming an important part of their life story. IROs spoke positively about social workers' relationships with their children and their quick response to any escalation in children's needs or increasing risks. [Ofsted ILACS 2026](#)

- 6.3 The feedback from Ofsted on the calibre of the IRO service provides reassurance that the improvements made over the past three years are leading to a strong service for children and families. During these inspection processes, improvement work was shared with inspectors and demonstrated that there was full awareness of strengths and areas for improvement.
- 6.4 Caseloads for full time in house IROs average around 55 children and young people, which is within the levels set out in the IRO Handbook (50 -70). This reflects a recognition that the IRO Handbook was published some time ago and that the scope and expectations of the IRO role have increased, particularly in relation to oversight, challenge and quality assurance. Reduced caseloads support IROs to undertake their full range of responsibilities effectively, including midway monitoring, participation in QA activity, and maintaining regular engagement with children and professionals. This also considers the practical demands of the role, including significant travel as a high proportion of children and young people are placed outside of Brent. It also ensures strengthened IRO oversight, improved scrutiny of care planning, and more effective escalation, contributing to improved outcomes and compliance with statutory responsibilities for children and young people.
- 6.5 A significant proportion of children and young people continue to be placed at distance from Brent, with 59.6% of new placements in 2025/26 outside the local authority boundary and 11.5% placed over 20 miles away. This presents ongoing challenges for IROs in terms of travel time, the ability to see children regularly between reviews, and building and maintaining meaningful relationships. While IROs make every effort to remain involved and visible, distance can limit opportunities for any additional contact and direct engagement with children and carers.
- 6.6 Placement stability has shown some improvement, with 11.9% of children experiencing three or more placements during the year (down from 14% in 2024/25). However, where placement moves or breakdowns do occur, this requires an early review to be held within statutory timescales, often at short notice, placing additional pressure on IRO capacity and scheduling. This can further impact the ability to plan visits and maintain consistent oversight, particularly where children are placed out of borough.

6.7 The IRO Practice Manager, who is managed by the Safeguarding and Reviewing Service Manager, provides oversight of Aidhour IROs. Monitoring is undertaken through practice development meetings, quarterly contract monitoring meetings, review of LAC performance data and audits, as well as individual supervision and regular discussions. Practice development meetings also provide an opportunity for IROs to raise any issues or themes with senior leaders, ensuring effective communication and escalation of concerns. Invitations for internal staff and external professionals include:

- The Director of Early Help and Social Care
- 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
- The Service Manager for Children with Disabilities
- Adopt London West
- The Mosaic System Review Lead
- The Service Manager of the Performance Team

6.8 IROs provide ongoing monitoring and scrutiny outside of statutory CLA reviews through quality assurance activity, including midway monitoring, escalation where required, and consultation with social work teams. There is clear evidence from case file dip sampling and Mosaic records that IROs are actively involved in planning and decision-making for children and young people.

6.9 A revised IRO midway monitoring template has been implemented to ensure consistent capture of key information between reviews. In addition, practice has strengthened in relation to children who are both looked after and subject to child protection plans, with Child Protection Advisors now routinely invited to the first CLA review to support effective care planning and ensure that children's needs are fully addressed.

6.10 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. The new midway template has now been implemented into mosaic in December 2025 to capture pertinent information between reviews, this is tracked within the IRO/CLA dashboard by the IRO Practice Manager. The process of ending child protection plans for looked after children, 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.

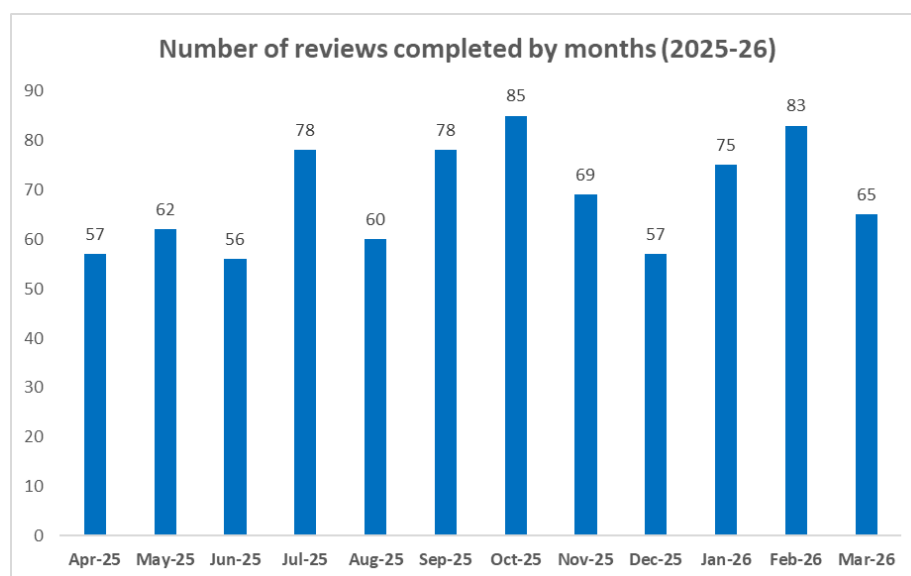
7.0 Performance of the IRO service

7.1 The following information provides a summary of performance in 2025/26:

- 825 LAC Reviews took place for 455 children, 27 reviews more than in 2024-2025, when 798 LAC Reviews took place for 440 children.

- A total of 86% of reviews happened within statutory timescale. This is slightly higher than in 2025/24 (85%) and in 2023/24 (83%) and continues to be an area of improvement for 2026/27. IROs have identified factors contributing to delays in reviews, including limited availability of professionals and parents, late referrals, and the challenges of rearranging reviews once scheduled.
- There were on average 69 reviews chaired each month in 2025/26 compared to a monthly average of 66 in 2025/24. Reviews peaked to 85 in Oct 2025 and 83 in February 2026 with less busy months being April, June and December 2025.

7.2 Table 6: Number of reviews per month



7.3 Attendance and participation of children

7.4 Ensuring that IROs, during CLA reviews, encourage meaningful participation from children and young people of all ages remains an expected practice standard for IROs. CLA reviews provide an important opportunity for children to have their voice heard, to influence who attends their review, and, where appropriate, to help shape the agenda and lead parts of the meeting. Creative resources continue to be shared with IROs and will remain a standing item at IRO practice meetings to support child-centred practice, with evidence of good practice being shared in future practice meetings.

7.5 Participation data for 825 reviews shows that the majority of children and young people were enabled to contribute to their reviews in a range of ways: 60% physically attended and spoke for themselves, with a further 14% contributing through an advocate or IRO where they did not attend in person, and 6% sharing their views through another facilitative method. A small number attended and expressed their views symbolically (1%) or were present without speaking (1%). 16% of reviews related to children under the age of four, where direct participation is not developmentally appropriate in the same way. Only 2% of reviews recorded that the child did not attend and that their views were not conveyed.

- 7.6 This demonstrates that where children are unable or choose not to attend, IROs generally make every effort to gather and present their views in advance of the meeting. However, there remain occasions where participation is affected by age, disability, complex additional needs, or a young person's choice not to engage directly. Supporting participation in ways that reflect each child's individual needs and circumstances remains an IRO practice standard.

7.7 Participation & description of codes data table

Participation Types	Description of codes	Number of reviews	% of Reviews
PN0	Child aged under 4 at the time of the review	133	16%
PN1	Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself (Attendance)	498	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)	5	1%
PN4	Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself	7	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)	114	14%
PN6	Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium (Texting the chair)	50	6%
PN7	Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	15	2%
Grand Total		825	100%

8.0 Advocacy

- 8.1 Advocacy is a statutory entitlement for looked after children and care leavers, giving them access to independent advice and support. Since 2021, Brent has commissioned Coram Voice to provide this service to care experienced children and young people, as well as those subject to Child Protection Plans and Children in Need. The service is confidential and child-led, with a clear focus on helping young people have their views heard and taken seriously.
- 8.2 The number of young people accessing advocacy has continued to grow, increasing from 60 in 2021/22 to 127 in 2025/26. This reflects greater awareness of the service, both within Children's Services and among young people themselves. Most referrals

continue to come from professionals, although it is encouraging that young people are also self-referring, showing that they understand their right to advocacy and how to access support.

- 8.3 The main issues young people are seeking support with have shifted over time. Housing for care leavers is now the most common reason for advocacy, with support at meetings and access to education, training and employment also featuring strongly. Concerns about social workers or personal advisors have reduced and have not featured in the top issues during 2025/26.
- 8.4 Demand is not only higher in terms of numbers but also in the level of support required. Several children/young people have needed more intensive advocacy input, meaning the total number of advocacy hours exceeded the contracted level by around 300 hours this year. As a result, a waiting list was briefly introduced for a short period to manage demand.
- 8.5 A recent review of the service, including a dip sample of children and young people receiving the highest levels of support, provides good assurance about the quality and impact of the work. The findings show that advocacy is making a real difference for some of the most vulnerable children and young people, helping to ensure their views are heard and their rights are upheld at key points in their care.
- 8.6 Coram Voice uses outcome charts to gather feedback from young people, measuring areas such as confidence, wellbeing and relationships before and after intervention. Completion rates remain low, with on average four young people completing the chart each year, largely due to non-engagement, loss of contact, or in some cases disability. A small number of cases are also supported via the helpline, where outcome charts are not required.
- 8.7 Despite the low completion rate, the available feedback is consistently positive, with all young people reporting improvements across all outcome areas following advocacy support. Coram Voice continues to explore alternative ways to capture feedback from children and young people, which remains a focus within contract monitoring discussions. There have been no complaints about the service, and qualitative feedback from young people and professionals continues to be shared on a quarterly basis.
- 8.8 Continuing to learn from themes emerging from the Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service and evidencing the impact of sharing this learning with IROs and the LAC and Permanency Service, has been identified as an area for further development in 2026/27. In 2026/27, the Advocacy Service will be recommissioned with an increased budget to reflect the demand trends for advocacy support.

8.9 Feedback from children and young people using the advocacy service:

'I felt well supported by you at my CLA Review'.

- YP feedback, Issues-Based Advocacy

'The young person has told me she was very grateful to Helpline for connecting them with CLLC and legal support YP received before an advocate was allocated'.

- YP feedback, Issues-Based Advocacy

'The young person's self-advocacy has improved hugely. Where initially they did not feel comfortable sharing their views with professionals, at their most recent LAC Review, the YP participated fully with notes that they had independently prepared'.

- YP feedback, Issues-Based Advocacy

9.0 The Independent Visitor (IV) Service

- 9.1 Brent's Independent Visiting Service (IV), delivered by Coram Voice, provides children and young people in care with trained volunteer Independent Visitors who offer long-term friendship, mentoring and emotional support.

The IV Service continues to provide meaningful support to children and young people, although demand and referrals have fluctuated. During 2025/26, 13 matches were supported, slightly below the contract specification of 14 per year, compared to 17 matches in 2024/25. There were eight new referrals over the year, with most referrals coming from a small number of IROs who had strong knowledge of the young people and actively supported matching. Three new matches were made, with 12 active matches in place at the end of the year and five young people awaiting allocation. All matched relationships included face to face contact, supporting the development of positive relationships and new experiences, with a total of 482.5 hours of direct contact recorded. Work is ongoing to manage the waiting list and prioritise children most in need of an Independent Visitor.

10.0 Quality of Care Planning and progress between reviews

- 10.1 IROs play a central role in monitoring and scrutinising the quality of care plans. Continued work has supported improvements in how review records are written, with letters to children becoming more child-friendly, concise and accessible. Children and young people are supported to contribute to their care planning and receive copies of their review records to ensure they are kept informed and involved.
- 10.2 Midway monitoring remains an important part of oversight between statutory reviews, enabling IROs to track progress against care plans with social workers. Dip sample audits of case records and Mosaic activity shows a strong IRO presence, with regular engagement across the professional network. This is consistent with Ofsted findings, which identified that IROs know their children exceptionally well and demonstrate strong, consistent oversight. Inspectors noted that IROs use their understanding of children's lived experiences to inform planning, contribute effectively to decision-making, and escalate concerns appropriately. Reviews were found to be thorough, with

clear evaluation and next steps, and oversight supports plans progressing in a timely way to meet children's needs.

- 10.3 The 2026 dip sample audit highlights a strong and consistent standard of IRO practice, with the strengths identified last year clearly continuing. Letters are generally child-centred and well matched to the age and needs of the child or young person, with good examples of meaningful engagement and participation, including the use of advocacy and direct discussion. There is clear evidence of IRO oversight, particularly in how actions from previous reviews are followed up and progressed. Reviews are largely within timescales, with care plans available to inform discussions, and there are good examples of direct contact with children. Recording is thorough, with key areas such as health, education and care planning well covered, and most review minutes are completed on time. Overall, the audits show a service that is focused on listening to children, keeping oversight of their plans, and making sure things move forward for them.
- 10.4 Areas for improvement include ensuring that letters are consistently clear, accessible and easy for children and young people to understand, particularly by reducing the use of social work and legal terminology or explaining this more clearly where it is necessary. Recommendations also need to be more focused, with clear actions, named responsibility and timescales to strengthen accountability. For older young people, further work is needed to ensure that leaving care requirements are completed in a timely way, including making sure Pathway Plans are in place and Personal Advisers are involved. IROs also need to continue to identify and challenge practice that falls below the expected standard, including ensuring the consistent completion of care plans and pathways prior to reviews. Improvements in the consistency of the timelessness of review minutes is required to ensure that review minutes are uploaded of within 20 working days additionally some, clearer recording of life story work is required.
- Progress will be monitored through regular audits and performance reports. This will include checking that review letters are child-friendly, recommendations are clear and action-focused, Pathway Plans and Personal Adviser involvement are in place for care leavers, review minutes are completed within timescales, and life story work is clearly recorded. IRO managers will also continue to monitor and challenge any practice that does not meet the required standard.
- 10.5 An identified area for improvement is IROs having updated care plans, health plans and pathway plans available in advance of a LAC review. While IROs are identifying these gaps, this is not always leading to formal escalation. In many cases, IROs are dealing with this informally with social work teams so that reviews can still go ahead and oversight is maintained.
- 10.6 This partly reflects the period following service realignment, where a number of social workers were new to care planning processes, and IROs have taken a pragmatic approach to resolving issues at an early stage. However, this has also meant that the use of formal escalation has not always been consistent. Strengthening this, so that

gaps in care plans, pathway plans and health reviews are more routinely escalated where needed, will be an area of focus going forward.

- 10.7 IROs maintain oversight of pathway planning for young people aged 16 and above, ensuring that plans are in place and reflect their transition needs into adulthood. Where plans are not available or are delayed, IROs will challenge and escalate as appropriate. This includes promoting timely housing planning, including Housing Vulnerability reports, and encouraging consideration of Staying Put arrangements.
- 10.8 Following Ofsted feedback, strengthening the consistency and timeliness of pathway planning will be a key priority for IROs in 2026/27. This includes a clearer focus on ensuring that pathway plans are in place ahead of reviews and that young people's wishes and future plans are properly reflected.
- 10.9 Where children become looked after whilst subject to a Child Protection Plan, IROs continue to work closely with Child Protection Advisors to ensure an early review and avoid children being subject to dual processes. There has also been ongoing focus on supporting young people to understand their health histories as part of their final CLA reviews, helping them prepare to take responsibility for their health needs as they move into adulthood.
- 10.10 Supervision of in house IROs continues to provide an additional layer of oversight, supporting reflective practice and scrutiny of individual cases.

11.0 Escalations and Practice Alerts

- 11.1 Resolving concerns and professional disagreements in care planning is a key part of the IRO role. IROs provide independent oversight and are expected to challenge where there is delay or drift, while working alongside social work teams to support timely progress for children. In practice, many issues are addressed at an early stage through established working relationships, without the need for formal escalation. At the same time, IROs remain clear about their primary responsibility to quality assure care planning and ensure that each child's wishes and feelings are properly taken into account. Good practice is also fed back to senior managers to support wider learning across the service.
- 11.2 Statutory guidance requires local authorities to have a clear and timely dispute resolution process, with an expectation that concerns are resolved within 20 working days. In Brent, the escalation framework supports this, with issues progressing to formal escalation with senior management oversight where they are not resolved at an earlier stage. Where necessary, IROs retain the option to refer concerns to Cafcass.
- 11.3 Since December 2025, all IRO escalations have been recorded and managed through a revised Mosaic system, developed in partnership with the Mosaic Development and Performance Team. This has improved the consistency of recording and supported more timely responses. A review in May 2026 identified some practical system issues, which are now being addressed. Further work is planned to link escalation tracking into

the CLA dashboard, giving clearer oversight of themes and patterns. Ensuring that escalations are responded to promptly and effectively remains a key area of focus for 2026/27.

- 11.4 IRO's made 67 escalations in relation to children/young people in 2025/26 this is an increase from 27 in 2024/25. The reasons for IRO escalation remain consistent with the previous themes.

- 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.
- Delay in PA's being allocated

- 11.5 Where concerns are raised by IROs, these are generally responded to in a timely way, with many issues resolved at an early stage through discussion with social work teams. However, some require formal escalation and ongoing tracking to ensure resolution.

- 11.6 While there have been no escalations to the Director of Early Help and Social Care, the Corporate Director, or Cafcass, there remains a need to strengthen the timeliness of responses at Team Manager level within the Mosaic escalation process. This has been identified as an area for improvement to ensure that concerns are addressed more consistently within expected timescales.

- 11.7 The IRO Practice Manager has been in post since June 2025 and has strengthened oversight of escalations, including regular monitoring and discussion with Service Managers to support resolution where there are delays or complexities. Senior management oversight continues to support clear and appropriate decision-making in the best interests of children. Strengthening the timeliness and effectiveness of escalation responses will remain a focus for 2026/27.

12.0 Priorities for 2026/2027

- 12.1 Priorities for 2026/27 reflect the need to build on recent improvements following service realignment, strengthen consistency in practice, and evidence impact. The key priorities are:

Priority 1: Strengthen consistency and timeliness of care planning documentation

Ensure care plans, pathway plans and health plans are in place ahead of all CLA reviews, with a clear expectation that gaps are formally escalated and tracked where required. In line with Ofsted feedback, ensure that pathway plans are consistently in place, timely, and reflect young people's wishes, with robust oversight of transition planning, including housing and Staying Put arrangements.

Priority 2: Improve timeliness and quality of CLA review records

Build on current progress to increase compliance towards the 90% target through

improved tracking, earlier allocation, and strengthened oversight via the CLA dashboard. Increase practice to achieve at least 75% of CLA review minutes completed and uploaded within 20 working days, and ensure that all recommendations are clear, specific and measurable to support effective tracking and accountability.

Priority 3: Strengthen the use and impact of escalation processes

Improve the consistency of formal escalation, ensure timely responses at Team Manager level, and embed the use of Mosaic and dashboard tracking to monitor progress and outcomes of escalations.

Priority 4: Further embed child-centred practice and participation

Continue to develop creative approaches to engagement, ensuring that all children's wishes and feelings are captured effectively, including for those who do not attend reviews or who have additional needs. Develop a feedback form for young people to share their views about their IRO, working with Brent Care Journeys Empire to agree the most effective approach.

Priority 5: Ensure learning from advocacy and the Independent Visitor Service leads to measurable impact

Strengthen how themes from advocacy and IV services are shared with IROs and the LAC and Permanency Service, and evidence how this learning influences practice and service improvement.

13.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

- 13.1 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.
- 13.2 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.

14.0 Financial Considerations

- 14.1 The priorities and commitments included in the report for 2026/27 will be met within existing resources. The current budget of the reviewing service is £701K.
- 14.2 The Brent IRO service is delivered through a combination of in-house IROs and some externally commissioned resource. In recent years, with the recruitment of two permanent in-house IROs, the proportion of work undertaken by the external contractor has reduced.
- 14.3 The service is considering recruiting additional permanent IROs to deliver most of the service in-house. Detailed analysis will need to be undertaken to assess the financial impact of any proposals and budget implications. This should include a review of the activity data, costs implications of additional officers and potential reduction to the external contract budget.

15. Legal Considerations

15.1 There are no additional legal considerations arising from this report.

16. Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

16.1 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) considerations are contained within the body of this report.

17. Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

17.1 There are no climate change or environmental considerations.

18. Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

18.1 There are no additional human resource or property considerations.

19. Communication Considerations

19.1 There are no additional communication considerations.

Report sign off:

Nigel Chapman

Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development