

**Herefordshire Council**  
**Children's Children and Young People's Services**

**Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO)**

**Annual Report**

**2022/2023**

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**The IRO Annual Report 2022/23 will be presented to; Council's Children's Scrutiny Panel, the Corporate Parenting Board and the Herefordshire Children and Young People Safeguarding Partnership**

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The purpose of the service and legal context

1.1.1 The Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO) service regulations are set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook 2010 and linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance 2010. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from purely the management of the review process to a wider overview of the case, including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement in the quality of care planning for children Looked After and for challenging drift and delay.

1.1.2 The National Children's Bureau (NCB) research 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings regarding the efficacy of IRO services. The foreword written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; makes the following comment:

*"The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing."*

1.1.3 The NCB research highlights where IRO's identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to children looked after, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.

1.1.4 The Local Authority must provide for the children who are in its care; an allocated Independent Reviewing Officer within five days of them becoming Looked After, a first Child Looked After Review within twenty eight days and a second review within twelve weeks of the first review. Following this each child must have a review chaired by their Independent Reviewing Officer no less than every six months and the IRO should have oversight of the effective implementation of the child's care plan in between these reviews. This presents the IRO service with an independent view of not only each child but the performance of the local authority in its provision of care for Children Looked After.

1.1.5 This provides the Independent Reviewing Service with the opportunity to identify where Care Plans are not being implemented to meet the child's needs or where proposed Care Plans might conflict with the best interests of the child and escalate this to ensure the child's needs are met. It also provides the chance to identify good practice.

1.1.6 In addition to the review of individual children, the IRO Service is also in a position to identify and escalate systemic issues which result in the Local Authority not fulfilling its duties to children Looked After.

## 2 Reporting summary

### 2.1 IRO perspective on the performance of Herefordshire local authority related to its care of Looked After Children in 2022/23.

The IRO Service in Herefordshire always aspires to empower children and young people to lead the conversation about their Care Plan in their Child in Care Reviews. We support children to share their wishes, feelings and lived experiences in their chosen way, to champion their voice and improve their outcomes.

*S's review was held at her School at her request. The IRO supported S in chairing the meeting and opened the meeting with introductions of – "if you could be a character from Harry Potter, who would you be and why?" This set a jovial tone for the meeting as there were some Harry Potter references throughout – something that S loves. S was able to share her views upon all areas of the meeting and together everyone was able to create a plan that she was a part of.*

2.1.1 The IRO Service undertook 1278 Child Looked After Reviews (an average of three a year per child) and recorded 3246 'IRO Oversights' in between these reviews during 2022/23, of which 322 were midpoint reviews. The IRO will monitor the child's record in between statutory reviews to ensure that actions are being progressed at a timely pace. As a result of this activity, 190 'informal' and 'formal' disputes have been raised recording concerns relating to unacceptable drift and delay in completing actions or disagreements about the best interests of children. The informal process is the first stage of the process whereby the IRO speaks with the Team Manager to resolve the issues. In the majority of circumstances the informal approach is successful in reaching a resolution with 88 proceeding to the formal stage in the year 2022 - 2023. In all cases, both informal and formal a record of the dispute is placed on the child's Mosaic record.

2.1.2 By far the largest area of escalation this year has again been around addressing drift and delay in care planning, with this accounting for 63% of the 190 escalations (informal and formal combined) in 2022/ 2023.

2.1.3 The main themes arising from disputes demonstrate delays in assessments that inform care planning which directly impact on children's right to permanency and right to family life in a timely manner. The impact of such delay for children means that there is no security of a permanent home which is highly likely to affect their sense of identity and belonging. The IRO service has been manually tracking the outcome and impact to children following issues raised through the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) since November 22. There is evidence that where disputes have been progressed and resolved, they have resulted in outcomes such as permanency planning progressing, family time being assessed and reviewed to ensure it is meeting the children's needs, the dispensing of a Care Order ensuring permanence and a return to a normal life without professional involvement and securing ongoing support for a young person with complex needs into his adulthood.

There continue to be pressures within Herefordshire's Children's Social Care in terms of turnover of staffing that continue to contribute to drift and delay in progressing children's Care Plans. This has led to formal disputes not being progressed within timescales. Progress of disputes has also been affected by periodic staffing and capacity challenges within the IRO Service although at the time of writing the report the staffing in the IRO service is stable and IRO caseloads are fewer than 70 per full-time IRO, in line with the IRO Handbook. Weekly Dispute Resolutions meetings between the IRO Service Manager and Children in Care Service Managers, where disputes are monitored, progressed and resolved have not consistently been held.

## 2.2 IRO Service Performance

2.2.1 Herefordshire is a County with a relatively small population (c. 188,000 based on the 2021 Census) and with a lower than average population of children and young people, 16%, of the population compared with 19% in the UK as a whole. Approximately 37,000 children and young people are aged 0-19. At the end of March 2023 there were 408 children looked after by the Council, an increase from an average monthly average of 346 during 2021 – 2022.

The end of year figures gives Herefordshire a looked after rate of 115 per 10,000 children (West Midlands Regional Dataset) compared with the UK rate of 67 per 10,000 (Coram BAAF). The West Midlands regional rate aggregated across the 14 local authorities in the West Midlands is 100 per 100,000. Therefore, the looked after rate for Herefordshire is above both the regional and national rates.

During 2022/ 2023 the monthly mean average of Children Looked After in Herefordshire was 397.

During the year 2022 – 2023 Herefordshire has accommodated a number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (31 in the year), most of whom have been over the age of 16.

2.2.2 In 2022 the IRO's developed a midpoint review form that incorporates the Signs of Success element of the Signs of Safety model as well as Language that Cares. Midpoint review forms are written as if to the child and this approach has been taken to ensure that IRO's refrain from using professional acronyms and keep language simple. The use of the midpoint review form was launched in April 2022 and IRO's have been encouraged to undertake the midpoint review between all subsequent reviews. The IRO Service Manager holds a midpoint tracker that assists IRO's in identifying when midpoints for individual children are due and monitoring to ensure these have taken place.

During 2022/23 IRO's completed 322 midpoint reviews and this is forecast to increase in the coming year, however, where midpoint reviews have been completed and the IRO has noted concerns regarding drift and delay in care planning, this has been followed by formal escalation to address the issue. The use of the midpoint template was initiated during 2022/ 23 and it is important to note that there were 3246 IRO oversights (including midpoints) added on files during 2022/ 23 as IRO's maintain regular oversight of children's files around the regular Review process. Oversights include records of discussions with carers, children and Social Workers. Additionally IRO's make

formal oversight of children's care plans at the CLA Review and there is also the opportunity for oversight at the Permanence Panel.

## **3 Report**

### **3.1 IRO Core Activities**

3.1.1 During 2022/ 2023 there has been a small increase of children coming into Local Authority care, 379 at the beginning of the year and 408 at the end of March 2023. A significant number of the children coming into care have been unaccompanied minors (31 since October 2022). This has brought new challenges and opportunities for Herefordshire as this is a new group of children and young people to work with. We have found that often the young people's age has been disputed by the Home Office, there are language barriers for professionals to navigate, specific cultural and religious needs to meet, and issues with their legal status. Herefordshire is a rural community with a predominantly white population (Census Data 2022 96.9% of the population identify as white). Whilst the arrival of UASC children and young people has provided the opportunity for IRO's to extend their practice and develop new skills in working with often traumatised children from abroad there have been challenges in meeting some of the needs of our unaccompanied minors which has meant that the majority of our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are placed outside of Herefordshire.

The increase in children entering care has had a significant impact on the volume and complexity of the IRO's caseloads. This has been acknowledged by senior leaders and a successful business case was made for additional capacity within the service in March 2022 with an additional full-time IRO being employed in May 22. This increased the number of IRO's in the Service from 5.5. to 6.5 and this helped to lower caseloads. In addition the IRO service has been supported on a short term basis by Child Protection Chairs, Advanced Practitioners and the Principal Social Worker for the increased numbers of children entering care.

The IRO Handbook states that a caseload of 50 to 70 children in care for a full time equivalent IRO represents good practice in the delivery of a quality service including the full range of the IRO's functions. Due to staffing difficulties there were times during the year when caseloads reached 80 children although with support from other staff outside the team performance in achieving reviews in timescale has been good. .

3.1.2 The IRO Handbook requires the IRO Annual Report to consider if additional activities of IRO's compromise either their independence or their capacity to function as IRO's. As stated there has been some disruption and pressure on the IRO service during the year, but IROs have been able to undertake individual monthly case auditing and the service has also worked with colleagues in the local authority to promote permanence initiatives by attending the permanence panel and contributing to the drafting of the Permanence Strategy.

Core activities of the IRO's include: preparing for and chairing Child Looked After Reviews, undertaking and recording oversight of cases between reviews with Social Workers and their team managers, reviewing case files, visits to children in placement, additional consultations with

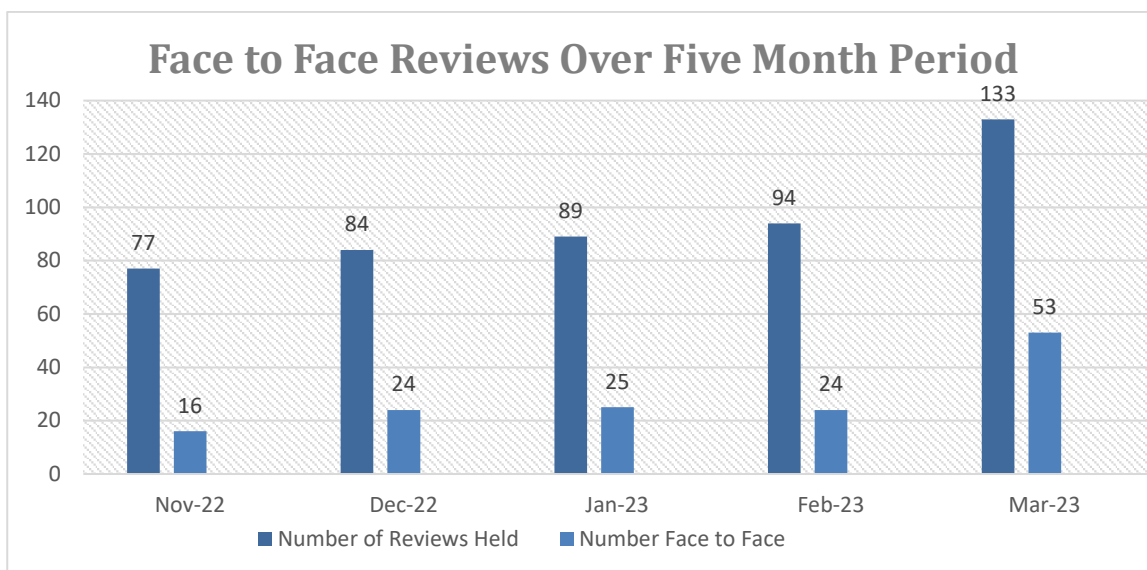
children, parents, carers and other agencies, quality assurance of assessments and plans which contribute to changes in care planning for the child, liaison with CAFCASS Guardians in court proceedings and clarification of legal advice, as well as the escalation of informal and formal disputes to address drift and challenge where there is disagreement in promoting the child’s best interests.

### Visits to children and young people

Between April 2022 and March 2023 the IRO’s undertook 101 face to face visits to children.

The IRO Service has also been increasing the number of face to face CLA Reviews. The increase in face to face reviews has meant that more children are being encouraged to fully participate in their reviews and be involved in the decisions being made about their lives. A number of reviews were still being held virtually during 2022 – 2023 and although the number of face to face Reviews have been affected by staffing challenges within the IRO service, priority has been given to the timeliness of reviews. Timeliness of CIC Reviews has been above 90% each month during this year.

The following is a breakdown of face to face reviews from December 2022 to March 2023 which demonstrates the increase in the frequency of face to face reviews (21% being face to face in November 2022 and 40% in March 2023):



## 3.2 Child Looked After Reviews

3.2.1 There were a total of 1278 **CLA Reviews** undertaken by IRO’s in 2022/23. The breakdown of this activity is as follows:

1st Child Looked After Review	131
2nd Child Looked After Review	116
Subsequent Looked After Review	1031

3.2.2 The data for this year provides a mixed picture in areas of process compliance related to Children Looked After Reviews. There has been a decline in the percentage of first CLA Reviews being completed within timescales from 78% in 2021 – 2022 to 73% in 2022 - 2023. Timeliness of initial reviews within this year's period have been affected by late notifications received regarding Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and also the staffing challenges within the IRO Service. It is recognised that the systems process for notifying all pertinent departments of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children needs to be improved to ensure there is no delay in allocating IRO's as well as other service professionals. The procedures for working with unaccompanied minors is due to be reviewed by the Practice Development Leads and it is hoped that as part of this systems processes will be strengthened to ensure all professionals are notified swiftly when an unaccompanied asylum seeking child enters care.

It is worth noting, however, that performance by IRO's in undertaking second and subsequent CLA Reviews has been much better for the year with 93% of second reviews in timescale and 97% of subsequent reviews in timescale also. As a result over 90% of all Reviews have been held within the statutory timescales.

During 2022/23 there has been significant drop in performance in relation to CLA Review minutes being written within 20 working days of a review being held (47%). It is anticipated that performance in this area will improve once the IRO service has a full establishment of staff. 53% of review minutes were distributed within 20 working days. It is accepted that performance in this area has been poor and despite there having been some improvement since December 2022. Further work is needed between the IRO Service and Directorate Support to ensure that minutes are distributed within 20 working days. Going forwards the IRO Service Manager will be working with Directorate Support to track timely completion of minutes and discuss any issues with individual IRO's. Decisions taken by Senior Managers to divide Business Support between the Safeguarding Service and the Corporate Parenting Service in 2022 has had a positive impact on minute distribution as can be demonstrated by the improvements seen from December 2022. This change has also meant that the IRO Service has had more consistent support in terms of scheduling reviews, sending out invitations and consultation forms, and distributing review minutes. It is hoped that with this continued support, performance in timely distribution of review minutes will improve in the coming year in line with the service target of 75% in timescale by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023 and 100% by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024. Performance against this indicator will be reported on at the service wide monthly performance meeting.

3.2.3 **Total IRO oversights** recorded on children's files in 2022/23 for Children Looked After was 3246, of which 322 were midpoint reviews. Aside from midpoints IRO oversight includes case escalations through the Dispute Resolution Process, records of visits to children, records of communication with social workers and periodic case notes monitoring the care plan or other issues effecting the child. The midpoint review template was created by the IRO's to make monitoring more consistent across the service and was launched in April 2022. Additional IRO oversight takes place in the CLA Reviews and Permanence Panel.

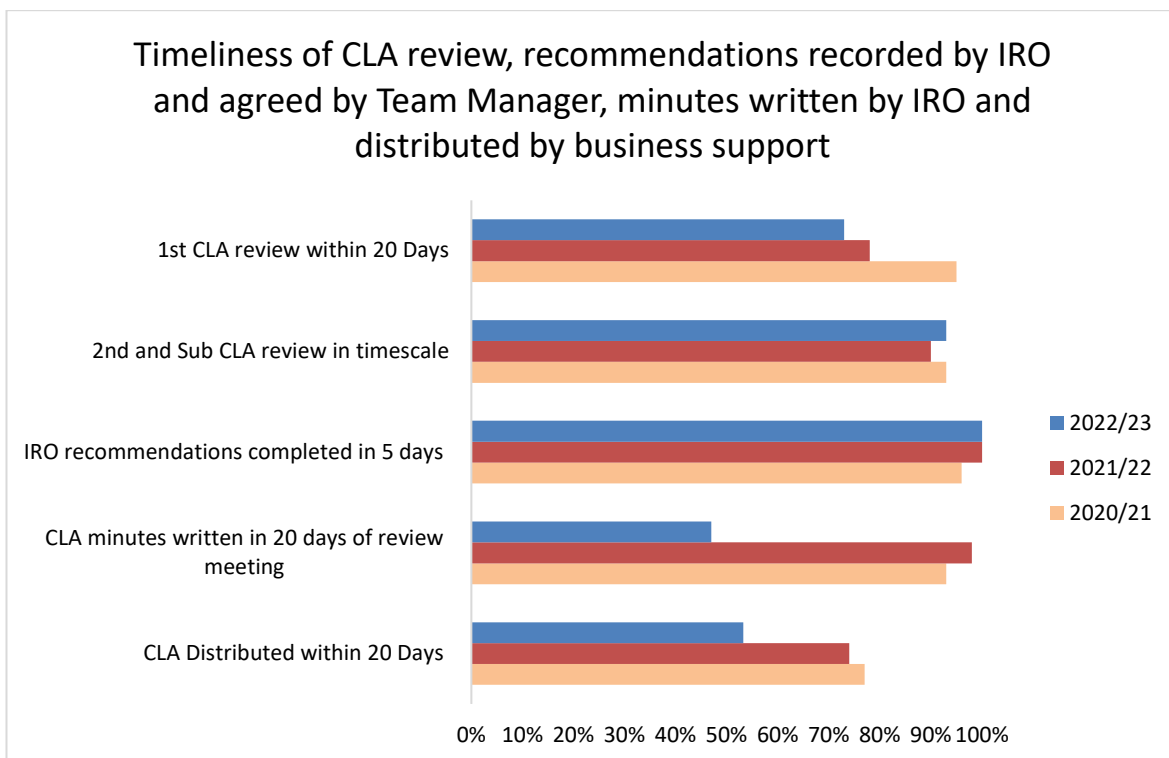


The table below illustrates the volume of IRO oversights over the last three years.

<b>IRO Oversights</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022/23</b>
Child has minimum 2 or more IRO oversights	100%	98%	95%
Child has minimum 4 or more IRO oversights	96%	86%	80%

In addition, plans are in place to create a Mosaic system midpoint review episode that will be automatically triggered 3 months after each subsequent CLA Review to prompt the IRO to complete. This will enable the IRO Service to track timely completion rates as part of ongoing performance management. The Head of Service for Quality Assurance and Safeguarding will also ask the quality assurance team to work with the IRO service to provide additional oversight to ensure that midpoint reviews are clear, that they record the progress of any recommendations, track what is working well for the child, whether permanency planning is progressing appropriately and what action the IRO will be taking to address any issues noted with SMART timescales for completion. In terms of improving practice the expectation is that IRO's undertake the midpoint review in consultation with the child's Social Worker.

IRO's continue to record oversights as necessary outside of the midpoint process and dip sampling continues to evidence the recording.



	1st CLA review within 20 Days	IRO recommendations completed in 5 days	CLA minutes written in 20 days of review meeting	CLA Distributed within 20 Days	2nd and Sub CLA review in timescale
2022/23	73%	100%	47%	53%	93%
2021/22	78%	100%	98%	74%	90%
2020/21	95%	96%	93%	77%	93%

### 3.3 Raising concerns and disputes

There continues to be a high number of informal and formal disputes raised in 2022/23. During this last year 190 ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ disputes have been raised regarding various issues related to care planning. This evidences continued challenge being undertaken by IRO’s through the Dispute Resolution process. The biggest challenge with disputes during 2022/23 has been resolution within timescales. Timely dispute resolution during this year has been hampered not only by changes of Social Workers and management in the Children in Care service, and adequate management oversight and monitoring to ensure timely progression of children’s care plans, but by also the staffing challenges within the IRO Service. There continue to be significant pressures on the Local Authority in terms of staff retention across all services as well as higher numbers of children who are in care. These combined issues have caused delay in progressing disputes. The IRO Service Manager and the Head of Service for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance have endeavoured to progress disputes through regular meetings with their counterparts in the Children in Care service. The IRO service managers have also used team meetings and IRO development sessions to stress the importance of IRO’s making use of the Dispute Resolution Process to gain positive outcomes for children.

The formal Dispute Resolution Process sets out a maximum period of twenty working days for the Service Managers/ Heads of Service to respond and resolve the matter from the date of notification, with a formal dispute meeting taking place by day 15 if the matter appears intransigent or there is no response received. Within this twenty days, depending upon the urgency of the matter, the IRO can set shorter deadlines and can undertake external escalation to CAFCASS at any point, as described in the IRO Handbook.

The IRO service has been manually tracking the outcome and impact to children following issues raised through the DRP process since November 2022. Since this time 24 formal disputes have been raised (88 in total during the year). Key themes include;

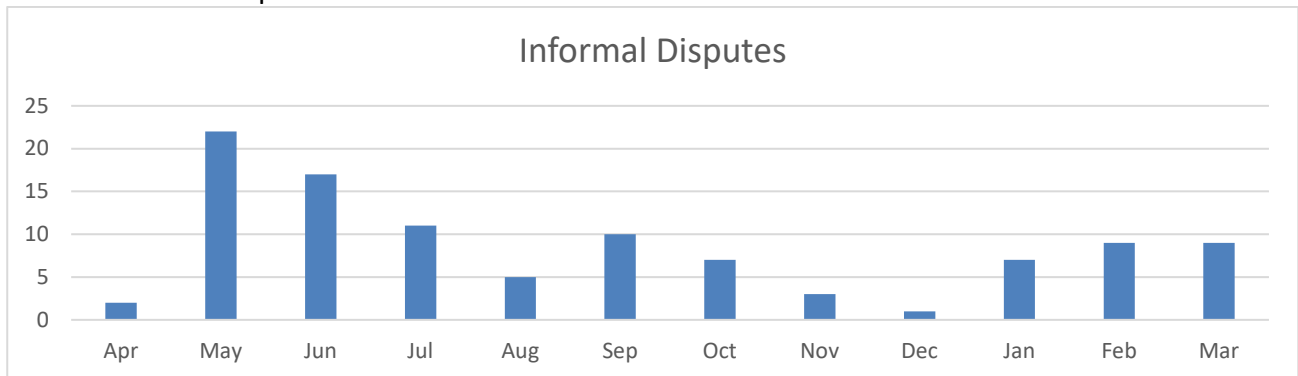
- Permanency planning progressing
- Family time being assessed and reviewed to ensure it is meeting the children’s needs
- The dispensing of a Care Order ensuring permanence and a return to a normal life without professional involvement
- Securing ongoing support for a young person with complex needs into his adulthood.

Although there has been some positive impact for children following escalation, it is evident that the performance in ensuring that formal disputes are resolved within the set timeframes needs to improve. During the last year changes in senior staff in the Children in Care service has made the weekly tracking meetings challenging to embed and performance in relation to resolving disputes in a timely manner has at times been poor. More recently the Head of Service for Safeguarding and Review has been presenting an escalations tracker to the Senior Management Team to ensure that service area managers are aware of disputes and can oversee them to completion. At the end of March 2023, 12 of the 24 disputes raised had been open longer than 20 working days.

### 3.3.1 Escalated to CAFCASS

In 2022/23 there were no external escalations to CAFCASS Legal by the IRO's.

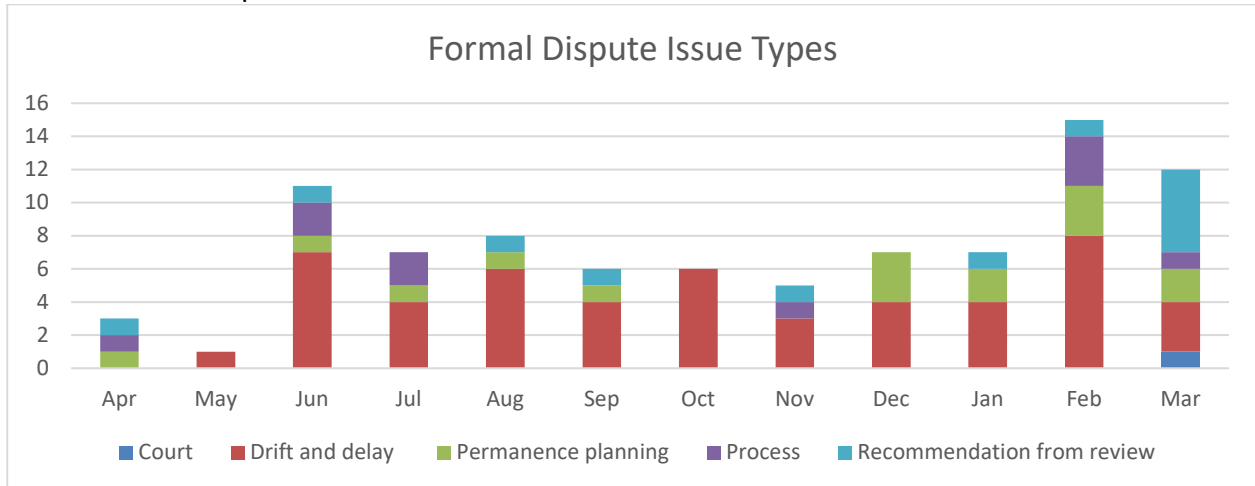
### 3.3.2 Informal disputes



The number of 'Informal disputes' has remained high in the year of 2022/23 at 103. The majority of the informal disputes have been raised due to the following issues;

- Incomplete care plans/ pathway plans presented to CLA Review (10)
- Drift and delay in progressing the child's care plan/ permanence plan (15)
- Drift in completing assessments to inform care planning (11)
- No allocated Social Worker/ Personal Advisor (1)
- Professional differences between IRO and the Local Authority regarding care planning (3)
- Outstanding recommendations from previous CLA Review (8)
- Issues relating to family time (9)
- Concerns regarding child's health issues not being progressed (5)
- Delays in progressing SGO applications (9)
- CIC Review held out of timescales due to no Social Worker (3)
- Concerns for the child's safety (4)
- Lack of Social Worker contact with child/ren (9)
- Child specific issue (17)

### 3.3.3 Formal Disputes



There have been 87 Formal Disputes recorded in the year of 2022/23, which is an increase from the year previous (77). The majority of these formal disputes have been raised due to the following issues:

- Drift and delay with care planning (50)
- Permanency Planning (15)
- Court related issues (12)
- Process related issues (9)
- Recommendations from Review (1)

The remaining formal disputes centre around specific issues for the child.

## 3.4 Independent Legal Advice

3.4.1 The IRO service sought independent legal advice on one instance in 2022/ 23. The advice was shared with the children in care service and a positive outcome achieved.

## 3.5 Compliments and complaints related to Independent Reviewing Officers

3.5.1 There has been one formal complaint made against an IRO in May 2022. The complaint raised a number of issues, including:

- **the IRO not responding to an email from a birth mother in a timely manner**
- **birth mother not being kept updated on progress of recommendations from the review**
- **another professional who attended the child's review advised the birth mother to make a complaint as she was worried about the child's behaviours and how this is managed by the Local Authority**
- **family time arrangements agreed in the Review were not being adhered to**
- **the child has told his Mother things that do not coincide with what is being said at the CIC Review**

- **the IRO's behaviour has impacted on the birth mother's mental health and well-being and goes against the PEOPLE Values**

The IRO Service Manager acknowledged the mother's complaint and responded to the specific complaints raised by her. The majority of the mother's complaint was not upheld however it was accepted that although we always strive to respond to parents and carers in a timely manner, on this occasion we fell short of the standard we strive for and an apology offered for this and for the additional anxiety and stress this had caused her. The mother was assured that the IRO was monitoring progress of her child's care plan and had placed IRO oversights on the child's file and had followed up on recommendations with the Social Worker. The mother was also advised of the Social Worker's responsibility to keep her updated on her child's progress. The IRO Service Manager reassured the mother that she had had sight of minutes that had recorded another professional's concerns regarding her child's placement.

The child's mother was offered a number of opportunities to meet with the IRO Service Manager in person to go through her complaint however she did not wish to pursue this and she accepted the response at stage one.

### 3.5.2 Feedback about the service

As part of the review process and in order to ensure IRO's are consulting with children effectively, feedback forms are sent out by Directorate support to the child, parents and all others attending the review. Completed forms are sent to the IRO Service Manager and feedback is discussed with the IRO individually to help them strengthen their practice. Positive feedback is also acknowledged more widely through monthly departmental shout outs. The feedback loop is a work in progress that the service needs to strengthen. The service is currently exploring different ways in which more feedback can be collated as the feedback forms are not routinely returned and this in turn is having little impact in terms of using feedback to improve the service. The service will be looking at how feedback could be collated more creatively in the coming year.

During 2022/23 there were 23 compliments received for the Independent Reviewing Officers that were formally recorded by the Social Work Academy and Head of Service for Safeguarding and Review through *Shout Outs*, as well as from direct feedback from social workers, parents, carers and other professionals. Below are a small selection of comments:

AB - IRO

"Thank you very much for sending me the number to be able to take part in the meeting this morning. It was really positive feedback about my boys. I'm so very proud of them. How well they're doing at school and flourishing in the lessons. I miss them so very much everyday. I would like to thank you for looking into more family time for me and my boys. I'm so very grateful.

A (mum)"

I like IRO S because we had a big talk and I told her what I want to happen. I want to go back to my mummy. She was very kind and we talked about lots of things

DN - IRO

I had a meeting today held by DN and would just like to say her involvement was much appreciated and needed by myself and my children's father. We had a meeting last week which she was not invited to and we felt we were dismissed pushed out and ignored leaving us feeling very down. After today's meeting we felt brilliant and like we had someone on our side as all we ask for is honesty and fairness as we have not seen a lot of this of late and she did a brilliant job she we totally fair on all sides pleasant and friendly and made

IRO MH has been a fantastic IRO, keeping on top of case notes and having discussions beforehand. MH ensures that she understands the children's voice and offers opportunity to speak with them

IRO CB was very professional in managing the meeting and listened to all views She made sure that all parties had their say and if she felt That something was unfair she would challenge the person in question fairly

The IRO offers to speak to the young person between review meetings, which I know is appreciated by the young person and during the meetings the young person is given opportunity to talk about the things that are important to her

IRO MH has taken time to really get to know S and uses her own skills in communication to understand S and also manage the issues around the family,,,,,as well as try and determine if there are emotional issues that have been left unaddressed. I have always found MH is be sensitive with children and is also very supportive and proactive with the professionals working with her.

SJ - IRO

Really impressed with SJ before, during, and after Child in Care reviews. The child has always been central to everything she does and I have found her

I always feel I can contact IRO CB and have done in between reviews to seek advice or share concerns if I have felt the social work team have not actively resolved an issue or actioned a task. CB is very approachable, and I feel she is very child focused where young people's voices are clearly heard, and they understand it is their meeting. CB also has contact with the young person in between meetings

DN - IRO

MA and SM really appreciated your professionalism, openness and honesty. Thank you for working the way you do and helping this family to feel heard and valued. I have shared with her that you are a real asset to our service

*IRO AB is the best IRO they have worked with. She is incredibly child focused and makes sure things are 'child-centred'. They said AB engages and communicates really well with them and M, M gets on well with AB, and feels confident speaking to her. M and her carers all feel listened to by AB, they feel more confident now in the oversight and support for M.*

*This is really important as T, M and M have had poor experiences previously, and the review last year was very different, with lots of issues in the challenges from CSW and IRO. So it is great this*

This is a sample of the feedback collated and demonstrates the IRO's skills, knowledge and experience in working collectively with all parties involved in care planning and working alongside children to ensure they are part of their plan and that the right outcomes are achieved for them. It is always positive for worker's and the team to receive positive feedback and this reinforces how Herefordshire's IRO's are aspiring to work in child centred way and this makes a good foundation for relational practice with children, carers and parents.

### 3.6 Consultations, participation in reviews, advocacy and Independent Visitors

#### 3.6.1 Consultations with Children

Consultations with children record when the child or young person has met with their IRO prior to the review meeting. The data also includes when a child or young person has been contacted and invited to meet with their IRO but has declined. As such the figures includes all children who had direct consultation with their IRO and those children who were given the opportunity to meet with them but it was the child's choice not to meet with their IRO. Dip sampling of IRO consultations with children will be undertaken in 2023 to ensure IRO's are routinely recording their consultations with children on Mosaic. In addition the IRO Service Manager will undertake a monthly review to ensure that this is on track and report this to the monthly Performance Meeting.

1278 reviews were held during the year period 2022/ 23 and 872 children and young people had a recorded participation code for their review (68%). During the year 314 children and young people attended their meeting in person, of which 41 asked their advocate to speak on their behalf (25%). 357 children and young people did not attend but conveyed their wishes and feelings through either their advocate, carers or the IRO (28%). 156 children were under the age of 4 at the time of their review so are not counted as contributing (12%) and 45 children and young people did not contribute to their review in any way (4%). This demonstrates that overall there is good participation and contribution from children in the Child in Care Review process. IRO's continue to encourage children and young people to attend their reviews given that a significant number do not and we aim to increase participation during 2023 – 2024. Increasing participation means that children are more engaged in their reviews and the impact of this is that

they are part of important decision making about their lives. Below are a few examples of how children have participated in their review and the impact this has had:

- *M was able to articulate at his Review around how frustrated he was about delay in revoking the Care Order. He talked about how it was affecting his schooling etc. and he wanted a normal life. The impact of M's voice in the meeting for everyone involved was the acknowledgement and commitment to ensure this was done.*
- *S chairs his own meetings now and this makes him feel he has some control over decisions made even if he doesn't always agree with them. For example he wanted to address issues around him not getting on with a member of staff in the home and through discussion he was able to appreciate the need to try and work round this rather than just move home. He was able to see how him being upset about this issue was affecting his family time. S was able to appreciate how professionals were working together for his benefit*

3.7 M attended his last review supported by his advocate. M has never wanted to attend his review meetings before. During the meeting he was able to clearly state his feelings regarding him not wanting to see his mum and the reasons why. As a result of this review the Local Authority now accept that this should not be pushed further. M also talked about wanting to remain with his current carers under an SGO and this is now being reconsidered by Local Authority.

- *S's review was held at her School at her request. The IRO supported S in chairing the meeting and opened the meeting with introductions of – "if you could be a character from Harry Potter, who would you be and why?" This set a jovial tone for the meeting as there were some Harry Potter references throughout – something that S loves. S was able to share her views upon all areas of the meeting and together everyone was able to create a plan that she was a part of.*
- *L's review meetings are held at her school at her request. She always attends the whole meeting and engages well in discussions. She always creates a poster about her interests before the meeting, based on the consultation form we send to children and young people. The poster is shared during the meeting and the IRO and everyone attending look at her interests which then triggers conversations about the care plan. Due to the way the review is managed by the IRO, L is involved in creating plans in her best interests.*
- *A's meetings are held in his home at his request. He is supported by an advocate to share his views. A completes the consultation form and meets with the IRO before the meeting so that they can discuss how he would like the meeting to be held and what he does/doesn't want to be shared. (He is also supported by an interpreter although he has great English!) During A's last meeting the IRO was able to open discussion into the areas he wanted and he and the IRO also agreed what she would share concerns about his social worker and PA on his behalf after the meeting. The IRO has since raised these concerns with the Managers to address. It was important to A that his concerns were raised on his behalf, but not in front of his social worker.*



It is important to note that all children in the care of the Local Authority can have an advocate to support them through the “Hear Me” service which is always discussed in children’s reviews by the IRO. One young person goes to great effort to produce a wonderful poster that she uses to communicate her wishes and feelings as well as what has been happening in her life which she is encouraged to share in her review by her IRO. A photo of these posters is uploaded to her electronic file.

### 3.7.1 Advocacy

The Hear Me Advocacy service is managed by the Herefordshire Council Complaints team and provides services to Children in Care, care leavers and children subject to a Child Protection Plan. During the last year increasing demand for advocacy resulted in agreement to expand the service. As a result of this 4 extra members of staff have been employed to the service. During 2022/23 126 referrals were made for advocacy, 69 of which were in respect of children in care. IRO’s continue to consider at each Child Looked After Review if there are any issues which the child or young person would like the help of an advocate to raise for them on their behalf. To this end IRO’s have directly referred 28 children for advocacy at their request. Some examples of the support provided by the advocates to young people during the year period of 2022/23 are where 4 young children were supported by their advocates to successfully challenge the reduction in their family time with their mother. Another young person sought support from his advocate to make a complaint about his experience in foster care and the Local Authority not listening to his request to move.

### 3.7.2 Independent Visitors

IRO’s continue to raise the question at reviews as to whether an Independent Visitor is appropriate for children. During the last year the remit of Independent Visitors changed in terms of working with any child or young person in care who wishes to receive this service. The role of the Independent Visitor is explained during the review and if the child / young person wants to have an Independent Visitor then the referral is made by the social worker. Funding has been increased during the last year to meet rising demand and during 2022/23 the Independent Visitors provided 369 direct contact hours to children in care. There are currently 20 children in care who have an Independent Visitor, with a further 11 children waiting to be matched with an IV. The Head of Service for Safeguarding and Review services meets with the provider of the Independent Visitor service, NYAS, on a quarterly basis to monitor the effectiveness of this service. User feedback from young people includes the following:



### 3.8 Communication with parents

3.8.1 IRO's undertook 346 consultations with parents as part of the review process in 2022/23. IRO's should clarify prior to each review if parents have been included on the invitations on the convening document and if not, why not. This was significantly affected during the year period of 2021/22 due to a high volume of changes in Social Workers as well as capacity issues within the Directorate Support service. However, in 2022/23 the Directorate Support team aligned with the Corporate Parenting Service the convening system has been reviewed and improved to ensure parents are invited to reviews where this is appropriate. Continued changes in Social Workers, as well as the staffing challenges within the IRO service in 2022/23 have impacted on reviews being re-arranged at short notice and this has had an impact on ensuring invites are sent to those who should be attending reviews. The Directorate Support service has sought to mitigate this by simplifying the convening process and emailing Social Workers with previous invitation lists (where possible) and asking them to confirm attendees 10 days before the review is due to be held.

Alongside convening the Directorate Support Service now routinely send out consultation forms alongside review invitations to children, parents and carers to ensure they have every opportunity to share their wishes and feelings.

## **4 Wider issues**

### **4.1 OFSTED Inspection July 2022**

4.1.1 During July 2022 the Local Authority was subject to an inspection by OFSTED. The outcome of the inspection was that Hereford Children's Social Care is judged Inadequate across all areas. OFSTED stated that too many children in care experience unnecessary delays in achieving permanence. (p 5 OFSTED Inspection Report July 2022).

In addition to the OFSTED inspection, Eleanor Brazil was appointed in September 2022 as the Children's Commissioner by the Secretary of State for Education as part of a Statutory Direction to Herefordshire Council in relation to Children's Social Care.

The Commissioner published her report in March 2023 which noted that the Local Authority had been slower than many other local authorities to return to face-to-face working. The report also highlighted that many of the agency staff who were recruited during the lockdown period and subsequently, were employed on contracts which allowed them to work mainly from home. This had resulted in concerns from families, permanent colleagues and partner agencies about a lack of availability and a lack of understanding of Herefordshire. The Commissioner stated that the Council had decided to close and dispose of the building where child protection conferences and other reviews were held as these were not happening. As a consequence the service was struggling to find suitable alternative buildings to hold these and conferences and many children in care reviews were still mainly being held remotely making it difficult for children and families to fully participate (P 14, Commissioner's Report on Ways Forward for Children's Services in Herefordshire. March 2023).

The Safeguarding and Review Service has worked hard to return to face to face reviews and as such has increased the number of face to face reviews on a month by month basis since November 2022. To monitor continued performance with face to face reviews, numbers of face to face reviews are being tracked on a weekly basis through the use of a bespoke tracker.

4.2 Where IRO's identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to looked after children, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.

4.2.1 Barriers to fulfilling the role of the IRO include drift and delay in permanency planning, drift in completing assessments that inform care planning and Care plans and Pathway Plans not being written in time for the child's review. These issues have been the subject of informal and formal disputes throughout this year. The IRO Service Manager aims to meet weekly with the Service Manager for Children in Care to monitor and resolve ongoing disputes and the Head of Service for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance meets with the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting should disputes escalate. In addition the Head of Service for Safeguarding and Review is now sharing the escalation tracker with Senior Managers to ensure a top down approach to ensuring practice improves in these areas. There have been instances of reviews having to be re-scheduled or held in a number of steps during 2022 – 2023. This has not been a widespread issue, but can cause delay on occasions. The need for additional meetings continues to arise due to assessments not being presented or completed in time to inform changes in care planning. Staff turnover in the Children in Care service is still the main contributing factor to this issue as new Social Workers inevitably take time to become acquainted with children and their care plans and may not always have a handover that includes forthcoming meeting dates

4.2.2 On 6<sup>th</sup> May 2022 The Safeguarding and Review Service expressed a number of concerns about the current level of risk within Children's Social Care to Senior Managers. Specific to the IRO service were the following concerns:

- The Children In Care and Care Experienced Service was functioning with 1.5 Team Managers across the whole service, raising concerns about management oversight
- Service Manager and Team Managers undertaking Social Work tasks which prevents them from providing management oversight
- Care Plans/ Pathway Plans and Reports for CLA Review not being available to the IRO's prior to the CLA Review and not shared with parents, children and carers in time for the Review
- Significant delays in SGO assessments being completed, contributing to drift and delay. Concerns regarding capacity within the Fostering Service.
- Some use of unregistered placements
- Children with no allocated Social Worker and young people without a Personal Advisor
- IRO's not being presented with final Care Plans. Care Plan being filed in Court without IRO consideration.

It is acknowledged that there have been some improvements as well as increased capacity allocated to the IRO service. There are now four managers within the Children in Care and Care Experienced Service. Service Managers and Team Managers are now focused on their management responsibilities. There has been some improvement in SGO assessments being completed albeit having been significantly delayed. Issues remain with Care Plans/ Pathway Plans not being available for review, permanency plans not being available for IRO endorsement. In a small number of cases where there is a dispute IRO's have ensured their views on permanency planning are filed separately and included within the court bundle for final hearings.

## **5 Progress as to plans for 2022 – 2023**

5.1 The IRO Service Manager will continue to observe the practice of IRO's at review meetings and audit the quality of Children Looked After Review Reports, minutes and midpoint reviews. There will continue to be monthly dip sampling of the quality of IRO Oversight's to ensure they are focused and purposeful, set out the views of the IRO's on the progression of the care plan and where required identify issues in practice. This will be included in the monthly Performance Report.

**Partially completed – all IRO's to be observed in practice by December 2023. Dip sampling of IRO oversight's continues however this work will now be more focused and will include regular dip sampling of midpoint reviews, IRO consultations with children and specific cohorts of children in care to ensure care planning is progressing at pace and that IRO's are addressing drift and delay where necessary. Dip sampling will be completed by the Quality Assurance Service and IRO Service Manager.**

5.2 Weekly meetings with the Children in Care and CP/ Courts Services continue to take place to review all open formal disputes to ensure that drift and delay identified by the IRO's services are dealt with in a timely manner.

**Completed – Meetings have been scheduled and are held to be fortnightly.**

5.3 IRO's will continue to contribute to their own and service development through monthly development sessions in which they will be encouraged to share learning and reflect on case studies. These are additional to the monthly Team Meetings. A Service Away day will be planned to explore issues and themes impacting on the service.

**Completed – IRO's meet on a monthly basis with the Service Manager and Head of Service. Sessions have focused on improving permanency planning, making best use of the Dispute Resolution Process, creative ways of engaging children in their reviews and improving performance indicators around the timeliness of reviews.**

5.4 IRO's will continue to monitor children's permanency plans, and refer children to permanence panel for oversight where there is an identified drift or delay.

**Not yet completed - Revised Timescale – December 2023**

5.5 IRO's will continue to build better working relationships within their link services. With each IRO being linked to a service area as a critical friend.

**Not achieved due to capacity issues in the IRO service. Revised date November 2023**

5.6 Confirm the permanent base for the IRO service.

**Completed – IRO's are based at Plough Lane.**

5.7 Review the current Dispute Resolution Policy to ensure additional tier of service management is reflected within escalation timeframe.

**Completed**

5.8 Develop a child friendly "Care Plan". This work is being completed in consultation with the participation group.

**In progress – preliminary work completed IRO's have formed a participation group of young people, September 2023. The group will meet monthly and progress the action to develop a child friendly plan.**

## **6 Moving forward**

### **6.1 Structure and profile of the IRO Service**

6.1.1 The service operated with 5 FTE staff members instead of its full complement due to staff sickness and difficulty in recruiting to a part time vacancy, however, we have a diverse service of IRO's in terms of gender, ethnicity and age. The IRO's bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to the service. The IRO Service Manager continues to have direct management oversight of IRO's. The current IRO Service Manager secured a permanent position in May 2022 following a period of acting up. This has ensured management consistency to the service. At the time of writing (August 2023) the IRO service is fully staffed.

6.1.2 The IRO Service meet every month to to share information from across the service, explore overall performance, share ideas and feedback on any actions. Guest speakers are also invited to meetings. Joint service away days (together with the Child Protection Conference Chairs) have so far been held annually with one being held in March 2022 and the latest service away day being held on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023. The purpose of the last away day was to explore service identity, direction and vision, the role of the critical friend and escalations.

## **7 IRO Service Priorities for 2023 - 2024**

7.1 Formulate the service vision, mission and key priorities for 2023 /2024 to include focusing on consultation and engagement with children, improving on minute distribution, undertaking effective midpoint reviews, achieving early permanence and challenging drift and delay.

**Target Date: November 2023**

7.2 Review and re-launch the Dispute Resolution process to ensure that children and young people's needs are appropriately met and children and young people enjoy timely permanence.

**Target Date: October 2023**

7.3 Ensure that children and young people achieve timely permanence. Regular review of children's permanency plans, refer children to permanence panel for oversight and develop performance reporting.

**Target Date: December 23**

7.4 Re-establish IRO links across services to build relationships as a critical friend and provide advice and guidance.

**Target Date: July 2023**

7.5 Re-establish monthly IRO development sessions to focus specifically on Restorative Practice in partnership with the Leeds Relational Practice Centre, share learning from training and information from regional IRO forum.

**Target Date: September 2023**

7.6 Embed quarterly dip sampling cycle of IRO midpoints and IRO consultations with children to help drive improvement.

**Target Date: April 2023**

7.7 Create a Mosaic episode for midpoint reviews to ensure performance can be collated and monitored thus ensuring that IRO's use consistent best practice in completing these.

**Target Date: December 2023**

7.8 Organise group events for children and young people to meet with the IRO Service to provide feedback on what we are doing well and how we can improve.

**Target Date: September 2023**

7.9 Achieve face to face reviews being business as usual with children and young people being actively involved in their plans.

**Target Date: December 23.**

7.10 Improve the timeliness of the completion and circulation of CLA Review minutes to 100% within timescale by January 2024.

**Target Date: January 2024**