

IRO Annual Report

2021-22

Julia Roberts – Team Manager Safeguarding



1. Introduction

There is a requirement, set out in the IRO handbook (paragraph 7.11), that the IRO service should produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice over the past year and highlight issues for further development.

Separate reports have been produced to look at the activity around the child protection process and the work of the LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) which also sit under Safeguarding.

This report covers the IRO service during the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. As per the requirements of the handbook, it will set out the work undertaken within the service and provide a commentary regarding the statistical information. It will make reference to the procedures around resolving concerns, the extent of participation and the development of the IRO service it will review progress in relation to the targets set for the previous year and set new ones for the year ahead.

2. The role and purpose of the Independent Reviewing Officer

The appointment of an independent reviewing officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

IRO's make an important contribution to the goal of significantly improving outcomes for looked after children. Their primary focus is to quality assure the care planning process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration.

In March 2010 the Government issued new statutory guidance for local authorities and IRO's on care planning and reviewing arrangements for looked after children. Broadly the expectations are as follows:

- Promoting the voice of the child
- Ensuring plans are based on up to date detailed and informed assessment
- Identifying any gaps in the assessment process or provision of service
- Making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and their entitlement to one.
- Ensuring that there is no drift and delay in the care planning and delivery of service
- Monitoring the activity of the responsible authority as a corporate parent

It is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, supervise the Social Worker or devise the care plan. It is important for the IRO to develop a relationship with the child.

The primary focus of the IRO is to quality assurance the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given full consideration.

In each childcare review the IRO will consider the holistic care plan for the child paying particular attention to the plan for long term permanency ensuring a consistent plan for the child throughout the duration of their childhood. The IRO will find out about the health, education, emotional and behavioural development of the child alongside issues around identity, family and social relationships, social presentation and self-care skills.

There is an expectation that the IRO will check that the child has appropriate savings and a bank account where appropriate. Rights and entitlements around having a passport and a driving licence are discussed and ensuring that a national insurance number has been applied for when the child is of sufficient age.

3. Profile

In Milton Keynes, the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and Child Protection Co-ordinator (CPC) functions are combined. Those occupying these roles are known as the Independent Chair (IC) and operate at the level of Team Manager to ensure they are in a position to challenge effectively. Each IC manages a combined caseload of children who are looked after and children subject to child protection plans. Alongside the Independent Chairs, the LADO function sits within the safeguarding service and on occasion, chairs are expected to fill in for the LADO.

Since 1 April 2021 there have been 7.5 permanent Independent Chairs situated within the safeguarding service. An additional LADO post was agreed and recruited to in this period.

The IC's in Milton Keynes are an experienced group of professionals who bring knowledge and skills to their work with young people and their families. Many IC's have had previous experience of management in other areas and have occupied specialist roles. We have seen two new IC's join the service within the past year. Both bring a range of experience and have been a very welcome addition to the team. Colleagues have been able to reflect upon their practice with the benefit of fresh eyes, peer observation has been very positive. Chairs offer expert support to one another and to operational colleagues to achieve the best possible outcomes for looked after children and those leaving care.

The period in question had seen the service respond to the challenges of Covid 19 and the progress made nationally towards a 'new normal' which has enabled meetings to be increasingly face to face where this has been risk assessed but has demanded unique and individual responses to the presenting demands of young people and their families.

While meetings have largely returned to face-to-face meetings, chairs have benefitted from the technology available to communicate with children and young people in a range of ways. Chairs continue to liaise with families, carers and professionals in advance of meetings to ensure that the focus remains on the child and that the voice of the child is kept central to the process.

4. Reflections 2021-22

A number of priorities were set last year.

What has worked well?

- Regular meetings take place to discuss distribution

- Quarterly reports are prepared for presentation at Performance Management Meetings. These focus on activity around child protection, looked after children and dispute resolution.
- A quarterly newsletter has been instigated. This contains key messages and reminders and has been well received.
- A weekly allocation meeting now takes place to ensure consistency across the team.
- Midway monitoring is embedded and generally booked at the childcare review.
- Chairs are linked to teams and regularly attend team meetings to improve communication and strengthen relationships.
- Progress has been made in relation to savings. A policy is in place which promotes joint understanding about what is expected.
- There is a good understanding of the need to promote permanency and throughput.
- A number of young people have returned to the care of families where this has been assessed as safe and appropriate, planned and supported.
- Chairs have continued to contribute to QA, taking part in case file audits/observations/thematic audits
- The majority of monitoring forms completed.
- Chairs promote the work with signs of safety. Several are practice leads and help Social Workers develop suitable assessments and care plans.
- Chairs have tested signs of safety forms and offered feedback regarding their suitability for use.
- Chairs have undertaken some peer observation which has been helpful in terms of feedback and practice development.
- Meetings have generally returned to face to face over the period and this has been well received.
- The technology has been trialled and remains in use for communication with children, families, carers and professionals in a creative way.
- The focus has remained on ensuring that the voice of the child remains central to the process.
- Letters to children are routinely written.
- There has been an overall reduction in the number of looked after children which is testament to the focus on throughput and permanency.
- Kinship placements are explicitly explored and encouraged.
- The majority of plans are deemed to be good or very good.
- Experienced members of staff are involved in making nuanced decisions around children placed in secure settings.
- The vast majority of placements are assessed as meeting the needs of the child.
- There has been an improvement in the attendance of young people in their meetings.
- Children are routinely visited by their IRO's and report good relationships.
- There has been an improvement in the attendance of parents.

What are we worried about?

- Distribution figures remain significantly lower than our target.
- Staff vacancies in Business Support has contributed to difficulties in distribution
- Rising numbers of child protection has impacted on overall caseloads for chairs.
- Overall caseloads have been high.
- There has been a slight reduction in childcare reviews held in timescales.
- It has been difficult to get feedback from young people, families and professionals in relation to childcare reviews.
- Participation figures for parents has reduced.
- Work around disruption meetings. Needs further development.
- We are concerned about the number of children involved in exploitation and plans are in place to meet their particular needs.
- There have been some concerns about the quality of contact but changes have been made in the service and improvements are expected.
- There has been a reduction in the participation of parents in childcare reviews.

5. Data and Performance

5.1 Changes in LAC population

Figure 1 shows the number and rate of LAC during the period 2021 – 22. It is clear that the numbers of looked after children has remained very steady over the year and overall, there has been a reduction in the number of children looked after compared with the previous year. At the beginning of the period there were 387 children looked after as compared with 362 at the end.

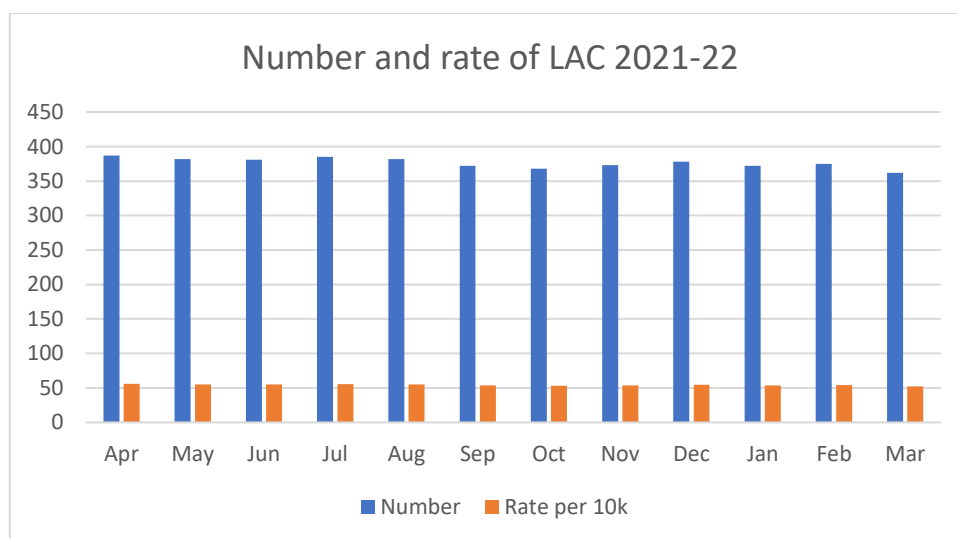


Figure 1 - Number of LAC and rate per 10k population

An emphasis on throughput remains a priority in Milton Keynes in line with the family support ethos. This means that, where possible, permanence options through Adoption, Special Guardianship Orders and return to family are explicitly considered which ensures that children only remain 'looked after' where this is the most appropriate option for them. We recognise the strength of long term matched foster placements in specific circumstances.

The Independent Chair will explicitly consider all the ways that permanency may be achieved in each Childcare Review and Midway Monitoring. This may include considering a return to birth family where appropriate and safe.

The data concerning the numbers of looked after children is closely monitored and scrutinised by the operational teams and the safeguarding service through performance management meetings, permanency tracking meetings, Placement and Budget Sufficiency group and External Placements panel to ensure that we fully understand the reason that children become looked after and consider permanency options at the earliest opportunity. This has ensured that throughput remains a priority. The edge of care panel is also well established and this looks at creative ways of supporting older children within their families by making resources available, thus avoiding the need for them to become looked after.

The number of children who are UASC has ranged between 20 and 33 (figure 2) across the year, dropping slightly to 28 in March 2022. Interestingly these numbers are very similar to the period between 2020-21.

Milton Keynes Council is part of the National Transfer Scheme, and this is likely to have an impact on the numbers of UASC's arriving in the year ahead as we seek to relieve the pressure on other authorities.

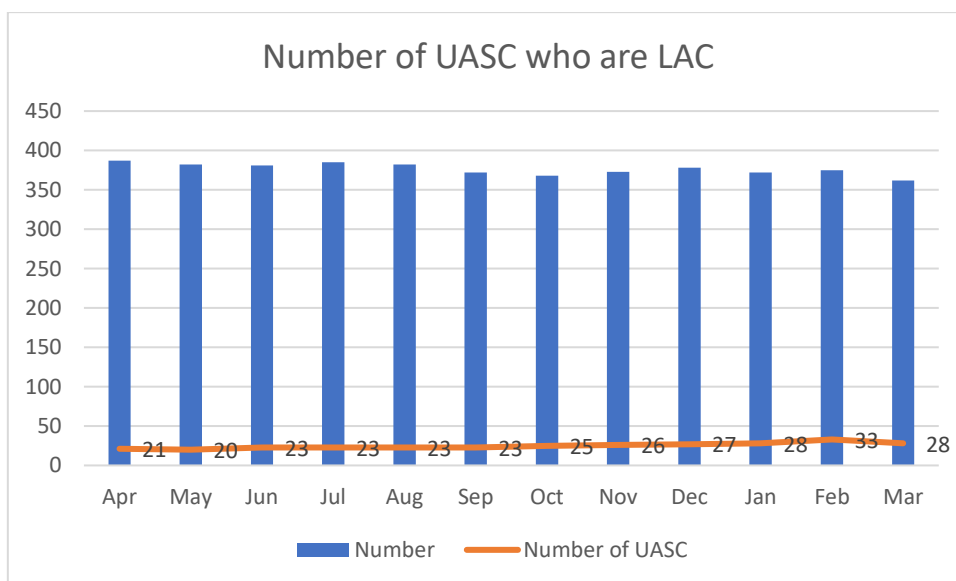


Figure 2 - Number of LAC and number of USAC at end of month 2021-22

We remain concerned about the numbers of young people who are considered vulnerable in relation to exploitation and gang related violence. On occasion, it has been necessary to identify a placement for these young people, however the emphasis remains on trying to support these young people at home or within their wider networks of family and friends. A multi-agency group sits to look at how intensive support alongside the Social Worker might avoid the need for these children to be looked after. The safeguarding service is represented on this panel.

Milton Keynes Council works hard to ensure that all options are considered before a child becomes looked after, there is a comprehensive management of the 'front door' in relation to older young people. A multi-agency panel sits weekly, and a range of interventions are considered to support young people and their families. In particular the Family Group Conference Service is used to good effect and is instrumental in enabling families and networks to step in and make good decisions about supporting young people where there are worries about them at home. There is scope for using this service when considering stepping a child or young person down from a placement and returning them to their family to ensure that a robust support plan is in place.

5.2 Unregulated Placements

The position regarding unregulated placements has come under greater scrutiny in recent years. A ban on placing vulnerable children under the age of 16 in unregulated accommodation came into force in September 2021. This means that a looked after child under 16, will not be allowed to be placed in an unregulated independent or semi-independent provision.

OFSTED has announced its intention to inspect and register unregulated accommodation providers for 16- and 17-year-olds in care and this change is expected imminently.

Meanwhile a weekly list is provided to safeguarding which details those young people who are placed in unregulated placements. This is circulated to all IC's to ensure that they are aware and that they offer greater scrutiny of these placements.

5.3 Profile of Children in Care

It is really important to reflect upon the profile of our looked after children. This means that we can ensure that their unique identity needs are properly met within placements and by specialist services. The fostering and adoption services are involved in recruitment of carers from a range of background and profiles to promote our ability to match children to placements where their needs will be met and where they will be able to develop a sense of identity which takes account of all aspects of their care.

Ethnicity	Percentage
A1 White British	56%
A2 White Irish	1%
A3 Any Other White Background	2%
A4 Traveller of Irish Heritage	1%

B1 White and Black Caribbean	6%
B2 White and Black African	1%
B3 White and Asian	4%
B4 Any Other Mixed Background	7%
C3 Bangladeshi	1%
C4 Any Other Asian Background	8%
D1 Caribbean	2%
D2 African	6%
D3 Any Other Black Background	1%
E2 Any Other Ethnic Group	1%
E4 Information not yet obtained	3%
Gender	Percentage
Female	41.7%
Male	57.8%
Transgender	0.5%

Table 1 – Ethnicity and Gender breakdown of children in care population

The profile of children in care remains generally consistent (figure 3). As in previous years, slightly more boys than girls are looked after and the majority of children are White British (56% as compared to 59% the previous year). The figure for transgender children has risen very slightly from 0.25% to 0.5%. The challenge of responding appropriately to the needs of these children is acknowledged and work is ongoing alongside the operational teams to review and revise this.

Table 2 shows the types of placements.

Type of placement	At 31.03.22	At 31.03.21
Foster placements – U1,2,3,4,5,6	71.5%	71%
Secure accommodation – K1	0.6%	1%
Homes and Hostels – K2	3.6%	5%
Hostels and other supportive residential placements – H5	8.3%	7%
Residential schools – S1	0%	0%
Other residential settings – R1,2,3,4	2.8%	0%
Placed for adoption – A3,4,5,6	3%	5%
Placed with own parents - P1	9.7%	9%
In lodgings, residential employment or living independently – P2,3	0.3%	2%
Other placement – Z1	0.3%	0%

Table 2 – Type of placement for children in care at year end

The majority of children and young people continue to be placed in foster placements. There is no change since last year.

Milton Keynes remains committed to promoting permanency for children and young people. We are proud of our focus on keeping children within their wider families and networks where this can be managed safely. Extended families and foster carers are encouraged to care for children under a

Special Guardianship Order which confers parental responsibility and ensures that children are no longer looked after. Thereby giving them a sense of security and longevity in relation to their placement. A support Services panel is well established which considers packages of support for this cohort. Safeguarding is represented on this panel and contributes to decision making.

Careful and robust scrutiny of children placed in residential children’s homes, via individual care planning as well as a monthly external placements panel chaired by a senior manager ensures that these placements are purposeful and lead to good transition arrangements to semi-independent, stepdown to fostering or return to family in a timely manner.

The figure for children in secure accommodation increased from 0.6% to 1% over the period between 2021 – 22. It is regrettable that there are some occasions when there is no option but to secure a young person to ensure their safety and to give them an opportunity to engage in work intended to help them make better choices. There are strict criteria which is in place to protect this cohort and can only be used when no other type of accommodation is considered sufficient to keep the young person safe. It is really important to plan for these children to return to the community as soon as this can be safely achieved. Placements of this type are monitored very closely. Regular meetings take place which include an entirely independent panel member to ensure that the panel can determine and recommend whether criteria continue to be met.

5.4 Average IRO caseload 21-22

Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
52	51	51	51	51	50	49	50	50	50	50	48

Table 3 – Average IRO caseload at month end during 2021-22

Average IC caseloads in relation to Looked After Children have reduced over this period due to the overall reduction in numbers of looked after children. While this is most encouraging, total caseloads for Independent Chairs have remained high due to the growing number of children subject to Child Protection plans. This data is examined in another report specifically looking at child protection.

5.5 Childcare Reviews held in timescales

The IRO handbook sets out a requirement for Initial Childcare Reviews to be held within 20 working days of becoming looked after. Subsequent reviews are held after 3 months and thereafter at not more than 6 monthly intervals.

Good practice suggests that an early review should be held following any unexpected change to the care plan. This might include an unplanned move. There is also an expectation that a Childcare Review will be convened to agree to cease the Looked After Child status where this has not been part of the previously agreed plan.

On occasion, in specific circumstances, an agreement may be reached to hold fewer formal Childcare Reviews in the case of long term settled placements. This can only be considered where a young person is in full agreement and all those involved in the care plan consider it to be appropriate. In cases such as these, a formal review should be held annually but a less formal review will still take place at the six-month point which is recorded on the child's file.

Performance	Avg. 2020-21	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Was the review in timescale	98.3%	99%	97%	93%	95%
Outcomes and minutes distributed in timescale	56%	48%	35%	7%	39%
Monitoring forms completed	77%	75.8%	70%	73%	69%

Table 4 – Service performance relating to timeliness of child care reviews

The percentage of Childcare Reviews held in timescales during 2021-22 is 96%. This is a very slight reduction from 98.3% during the previous year.

A total of 866 meetings have taken place over the year. This compares with 897 meetings in the previous year. The reduction is linked to the overall reduction in numbers of looked after children.

5.6 Distribution

Regrettably the distribution figure for the year has reduced to 32.25% from a high of 56% in 2020-21. Clearly this falls short of our target once again. There are several reasons for this which include vacancies within the business support service and pressure as a result of Child Protection demand. Minutes are not always completed by the IC within timescales and there are occasions when the Social Worker has not updated the care plan which impacts on our ability to complete the task. The Team Manager for Safeguarding ensures that outstanding tasks are shared with chairs on a weekly basis and addresses delay in supervision. Weekly reminders are sent to Social Workers to remind them of the need to complete the Care Plan in advance of the meeting and where this has not been achieved that it is done as soon as possible.

6. Monitoring and Scrutiny

6.1 Scoring of plans

The fundamental tasks of the IC are to monitor and scrutinise the activity of the Local Authority as a corporate parent, ensuring that it is operating in line with care planning regulations and meeting the needs of children and young people in its care. Where this is not the case, it is the duty of the IC to challenge robustly and ensure a suitable outcome.

There is an expectation that monitoring forms are completed following Childcare Reviews. During the time period 72% of monitoring forms have been completed. Updates to the LCS system in the months ahead will see the monitoring form entirely embedded in the outcomes and minutes document and which will ensure that they are all completed as part of the process.

Findings from the monitoring form are reported to Performance Management Meetings quarterly so they can be discussed, and any vulnerabilities identified.

6.2 Quality of planning

It is an integral part of the role of the IC to quality assure the care planning for the child. This includes scrutiny of the Care/Pathway plan, the Placement Plan and the Health and Education plans. Each should be considered at Childcare Reviews to ensure that actions are discussed and progressed, and that drift and delay is identified and progress ensured.

Quality of Planning	Very Good	Good	RI	Inadequate	Not seen
Care Plan/Placement Plan	15%	73%	10%	1%	1 case
Placement Plan	3%	85%	8%	4%	2 cases
PEP	4%	92%	4%	0%	11 cases
Health Plan	18%	82%	0%	0%	15 cases
Family Time Plan	10%	56%	25%	9%	2 cases
Leisure	14%	65%	18%	3%	0 cases

Table 5 – IRO monitoring of quality of planning 2021-22

The majority of Care Plans and Pathway Plans were deemed to be good or very good. The monitoring forms are sent to the Team Manager or Line Manager for the Social worker which enables a discussion to be had in supervision and feedback offered. This is particularly important where the plan is deemed to be Requires Improvement or inadequate. There is an expectation that there is an analysis to accompany the score which explains the rationale and contributes to qualitative feedback.

Placement Plans are generally good although a small number are deemed to be 'requires improvement or inadequate. Where this is the case there will be an expectation that the chair raises their concerns directly and that this is recorded on the child's file.

Personal Education Plans are generally judged to be good or very good. None are deemed inadequate. The Safeguarding team maintains good links with colleagues in the virtual school and work closely to ensure that there is a connection between PEP meetings and CCR's. On occasion the two are combined where this is agreed with the child and in their best interests.

Health plans are generally deemed to be good or very good. Once again chairs liaise closely with health colleagues to ensure that issues are discussed, and actions followed up.

There have been a number of changes to the contact service which has now been renamed the Family Time Service. Statistics indicate that a number of plans were not meeting the expectations between April 2021 and March 2022. One chair is linked to that service and good progress has been made which should see an improvement in the feedback over the year ahead.

Placement and reviewing	Avg 20-21	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Does the Placement meet the child's needs and wishes	95%	97%	93%	95%	87%

Table 6 – IRO monitoring of placement meeting child's wishes and feelings 2021-22

In general, the placements for children meet their needs and wishes (average across the year is 93%) although this is a very slight reduction on the previous year (95%) it remains encouraging. Inevitably there are placements which could not be deemed suitable. Examples of this are young people in custody or in secure placements which, no matter how good, are not ideal and not designed to be long term, settled placements and cannot, therefore be deemed suitable.

As in previous years, there are a great many examples of good collaborative work between the Social Worker and the Independent Chair to ensure good outcomes for children and young people. There is an expectation that the Social Worker will proactively ensure that the chair is kept up to date with progress and notified of any significant change in a child's life, particularly when this may affect the care plan.

6.3 Feedback

Service User feedback is sought following each Childcare Review. Since the pandemic it has been more difficult to ensure feedback is gathered effectively. Feedback forms are now emailed along with the outcomes and minutes documents.

Fewer feedback forms were received in this period as compared with the previous one. This approach does require the attendee to complete the form electronically and return to the safeguarding team. Where the outcomes and minutes form has been delayed in distribution there is a clear time delay.

The feedback we received was generally positive with attendees commenting that they felt that reviews were chaired well or very well, that they felt that the right people were in attendance/had been consulted and that the child was able to participate.

It is encouraging that, even in the case of negative feedback, the attendee was able to share their views enabling them to be discussed.

"There is a lot of support for the young person from SW and from VS and this was made clear during the meeting and at PEPs". (professional)

"It was really disappointing that the chair was very disrespectful by talking about me looking sober as is she had seen me drunk or drinking before, she also carried on about my drinking in front of my mother and my son, one I felt it was unprofessional and unfair". (parent)

"As this was my first meeting for this child, I felt very supported and felt that my views were considered". (carer)

"This was a very positive review for NH and showed that he is making very good progress within the placement and engaging well". (professional)

"The meeting was chaired very well and all views were heard and taken into account. The meeting helped clarify standpoints in a clear and easy to understand way. It was helpful so all parties could report progress made and have a clear understanding of the procedures to follow. The chair was very welcoming and made a novice feel at ease throughout the entire meeting" - (grandparent)

7. Participation

Attendance and Participation	Avg. 20-21	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Avg. 21-22
YP attendance	45%	54%	57%	59%	67%	60%
YP participation	94.7%	96%	89%	82%	85%	88%
Mothers' attendance	51%	58%	49%	47%	46%	50%
Mothers' participation	74%	71%	73%	53%	60%	65%
Fathers' attendance	27.2%	38%	30%	24%	28%	30%
Fathers' participation	56%	61%	38%	33%	37%	43%

Table 7 – Participation and engagement in child care reviews in 2021-22

There has been an improvement in the attendance of young people in their meetings. The figures show an increase over each quarter which is positive. Over the period 2021-22 there was an increase in meetings taking place face to face and this has generally been well received by young people and their families and carers.

Independent Chairs routinely write to children following their reviews with a record of their meeting. This has been well received by children and young people and encourages their participation.

Children and young people are routinely visited by the IC between reviews to ensure that they are properly consulted and fully involved in shaping the meeting. Ideally, they should be involved in making decisions about who should attend their meeting and where it will be held. Where a young person wishes to chair their own meeting, this should be encouraged and facilitated.

It remains of vital importance to ensure that parents and wider families can contribute fully to the care planning process that they participate appropriately at Childcare Reviews. Where it is in the best interests of the child or young person and in line with their wishes, family are encouraged to attend in person. Where this is not appropriate, the IRO should ensure that the views of the parents and family are shared at the review. This may be via the Social Worker or by direct contact with the parent. It is the case in Milton Keynes, thanks to a largely settled group of chairs, that many of them have worked with families for significant periods of time and know them well. This can be very helpful when there may be a succession of Social Workers involved.

In 2021-22, we can see that the number of mothers attending reviews has remained the same and has increased slightly in respect of fathers.

Participation figures for both mothers and fathers have reduced. There is a lack of clarity about this being a recording issue and chairs will be reminded of the importance of accuracy in recording participation only where it can realistically be expected.

8. Challenge and Dispute Resolution

It is a key function of the Independent Reviewing Officer, as outlined in the IRO handbook. To challenge on behalf of a child or young person to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. To ensure this, a local dispute resolution process must be in place. It is equally important to recognise and celebrate good practice with the practitioner and their line manager.

In line with the guidance, there is an expectation that the Chair will speak to the Social Worker in the first instance, involving their manager if necessary to raise concerns and try to resolve any issues which arise in an informal arena. Where this is the case, the IC should ensure that this activity is clearly recorded on the LCS recording system using the IRO dispute resolution tab. This ensures that there is a clear record of action taken on behalf of the child or young person and that there is an IRO footprint to be found on the file.

Where an issue cannot be resolved in this way, the Chair is required to complete the dispute resolutions form which can be found on the child's electronic file. This may still be classified as an informal dispute resolution in the first instance although the IRO has a responsibility to escalate where they consider that this might be necessary. The legislation provides for a referral to CAFCASS at any point in the process.

During the year 2021-22 there have been 30 forms completed on LCS to raise concerns. Recurring themes are care/pathway plans being incomplete, delay in progressing permanency or provision of services and queries over savings

The introduction of midway monitoring meetings has done much to address issues around drift and delay by ensuring scrutiny and overview more regularly. This process requires the IC to meet with the SW to review the care plan and progress on actions. The chair may also consult with the child, family, carer, and other professionals where they consider this to be necessary. An audit was completed which demonstrated the effectiveness of this process.

9. Disruption Meetings

Independent Chairs are expected to chair Disruption Meetings in line with Milton Keynes protocol.

During the period 2021-22, a total of 9 children were referred to the safeguarding service following the breakdown of a long-term matched placement, or a child placed for adoption. Recommendations were made and shared with professionals.

The protocol is yet to be updated and this will be achieved in the year ahead.

10. Secure Accommodation Reviews

The Team Manager for Safeguarding is responsible for chairing Secure Accommodation Reviews to ensure that the criteria for keeping a child in a secure home on welfare grounds is met. It is good practice to combine this review with the Childcare review. There is also a requirement for two independent panel members to attend. One of these usually comes from the safeguarding service. The purpose of the panel is to recommend whether the criteria is met for the secure placement and that actions are in place which will encourage transition.

During the period between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 there were up to three young people in a secure setting for a total of 23 months.

11. Quality Assurance

The safeguarding service continues to be a key part of quality assurance activity. The IC holds a key role in relation to the improvement and quality assurance of the care planning for Looked After Children in a strategic way as well as individually and for challenging any drift and delay. This is achieved in several ways. Chairs routinely play a key role in undertaking monthly case file audits, sitting with the allocated worker. They are involved in thematic audits and are uniquely placed to identify overarching themes and trends. Chairs prepare complex reports for presentation to senior management collating and interpreting quarterly data.

ICs are expected to contribute to household reviews in respect of foster carers and residential provision. They work closely with colleagues in commissioning and fostering to ensure that services for children are of good quality.

Chairs work closely with LADO colleagues where there are concerns about foster carers or others working in a position of trust with our children and young people. They offer good, evidence-based information which contributes to defensible decision making in the event of a managing allegations meeting.

12. Summary

Independent Chairs have worked hard alongside operational colleagues to champion the needs of looked after children during another unprecedented year. The need to continue to respond to children and their families and carers in creative ways has been evident once again.

It is positive that the numbers of looked after children has reduced slightly and that the numbers of looked after children has remained remarkably stable. This is testament to a focus on permanency and throughput which considers families and networks.

The safeguarding service has ensured that Childcare Reviews are held in a timely manner and that the voice of the child is kept central to the process and that children and young people have a sense of control in relation to their own choices and their own futures.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care by Josh MacAlister was published in May 2022. This makes wide ranging recommendations which will have an impact on all areas of Children's Social Care.

Of particular relevance is the emphasis on prioritising alternatives to care by utilising family networks and supporting kinship placements.

For those children and young people who are looked after, there is an intention to recruit more foster carers to promote choice in relation to placements and contribute to placement stability and long-term provision.

The report enshrines the right of the child to be heard and proposes a significantly expanded role for an advocacy service.

It proposes that no young people should leave home without at least two loving relationships.

It is aspirational for the achievements of care leavers by doubling the numbers of young people attending good universities and ensuring access to well paid jobs.

It seeks a reduction and an end to care leaver homelessness

It intends to reduce the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences including meeting their mental health needs.

It recognises the need to enable Social Workers to engage in more direct practice to create relationships with children and their families

It focuses on workforce development across operational teams and residential provision.

It enshrines a more robust responses to inadequate authorities.

13. Priorities for 2022-23

Impact

- Monthly scrutiny of the spreadsheet by to try and improve distribution figures.
- Weekly performance data will continue to be circulated to chairs to flag up timescales for outcomes/minutes
- Completion of outcomes/minutes will continue to be monitored in supervision
- Timescale information is routinely shared at quarterly Performance Management Meetings.
- Where care plans have not been completed, outcomes/minutes will be sent out in word and recorded on the child's file.
- Business Support will assist in updating the child's file when the care plan has been updated by the Social Worker.
- The quarterly newsletter will be circulated to highlight issues/good news stories and raise the profile of the safeguarding service.
- Weekly allocation meetings will continue to ensure consistency.
- An induction pack and training agenda will be developed to ensure that new Social Workers are familiar with the service.
- Chairs are well represented in relation to Signs of Safety as practice leads. Close working relationships are in place and chairs help to deliver training in this area.
- Chairs will be more closely involved in training for Foster Carers.

Challenge and Dispute Resolution

- Particular attention will be paid to ensure that all activity taken on behalf of a child to progress their care plan is clearly evidenced on the child's file.
- Independent Chairs are linked to the regional network and will ensure that updates and current ideology are shared and considered.
- Midway monitoring will continue to be scheduled at the Childcare Review to ensure that drift and delay is addressed, and plans progressed.
- Themes and trends identified as part of the dispute resolution process will continue to be presented to Performance Management Meetings.
- Chairs are linked to operational teams to promote good communication and working relationships.
- Issues raised with individual teams will be discussed at monthly team meetings.
- Challenge and dispute resolution are discussed in supervision.
- Chairs will promote the savings of children and young people and ensure that finances are accounted for including DLA, savings and inheritance.

Participation and Engagement

- Chairs will continue to work closely with Social Work colleagues to ensure that children and their families can fully participate in childcare reviews and attend as appropriate.
- Chairs will work closely with the participation service to develop more effective ways of gathering feedback.
- Chairs will continue to be involved in events to celebrate the achievements of children in care.
- Chairs will continue to work closely with those advocating on behalf of children and young people and promote the involvement of an independent person where appropriate.
- Letters to children will continue to be sent and IC's will review regularly at team meetings and peer supervision, sharing examples of good practice and helpful feedback.

Achieving Permanence

- Chairs will ensure specific reference is made to the care plan for permanency in all cases. This will include all available options for cases in proceedings where the care plan has yet to be agreed by the court.
- Chairs will remain aspirational for all looked after children and will consider permanency options including adoption for children of all ages.
- The Team Manager for Safeguarding meets regularly with operational colleagues to ensure that permanency plans are scrutinised regularly for all children where this has yet to be achieved.
- Chairs contribute to permanency tracking and challenge where there is drift and delay.
- Where appropriate, chairs will promote children and young people to return to family where this can be managed safely and is in their best interests.

- Where children are able to return to the care of their families, the Independent Chair will review and promote the package of support which needs to be put into place to facilitate the transition.
- Chairs will work closely with Social Workers to ensure that Children and Families Assessments are routinely updated for looked after children as appropriate.

Improving the efficacy of Disruption Meetings

- Disruption meetings will continue to be allocated to Chairs and key people will be invited to contribute.
- Recommendations from disruption meetings will be circulated to attendees and shared with adoption and fostering panels.
- An anonymised learning bulletin will be produced and circulated to operational staff to ensure that practice takes account of lessons learned.
- Themes and trends identified in disruption meetings will be collated annually.

Contribution to Quality Assurance

- There is an expectation that there will be a continued commitment to undertake monthly case file audits or observations of practice
- Monitoring forms will be completed after all childcare reviews
- Feedback will be sought from attendees at all childcare reviews and further discussion will take place with colleagues from Quality Assurance about how to enhance the feedback.
- Chairs will continue to work closely with the Fostering Team and Fostering Panel to offer constructive feedback for the household reviews.
- Chairs will continue to present complex data from the monitoring forms to Performance Management Meetings on a quarterly basis.
- Chairs will continue to work alongside colleagues in performance to ensure that data is appropriate and accurate and that it contributes to improving standards for children and young people.
- Themes and trends will be discussed at monthly team meetings as a regular agenda item. Specific areas will be brought to peer meetings and supervision.

Thank you from the Independent Chairs



Julia Roberts

Julia.roberts@milton-keynes.gov.uk

01908 254371

Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and Child Care Plans |
Milton Keynes City Council (milton-keynes.gov.uk)

