

**Manchester City Council  
Report for Information**

**Report to:** Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee – 6 September 2016

**Subject:** Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2015 - 2016

**Report of:** Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding

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**Summary**

The purpose of this report is to introduce the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2015 - 2016. The report provides an account of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Service between 1 April 2015 and the 31 March 2016.

This report evaluates practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children and the effectiveness of Independent Reviewing Officer service in ensuring the local authority as a corporate parent discharges its statutory responsibilities towards looked after children.

This report draws on evidence from the views of children and young people, carers, and professionals from the local authority and from partner agencies.

**Recommendation**

Members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee note the contents of this report.

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**Wards Affected:** All

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**Contact Officers:**

Name: Linda Evans  
Position: Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding  
Tel no: 0161 234 4960  
Email: L.Evans1@manchester.gov.uk

**Background documents (available for public inspection):**

The following documents disclose important facts on which the report is based and have been relied upon in preparing the report. Copies of the background documents are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy please contact one of the contact officers above.

Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2015 – 2016



MANCHESTER  
CITY COUNCIL

# Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2015 - 2016

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## 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this annual report is to provide an account of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Service between 1 April 2015 and the 31 March 2016.

This report will evaluate practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children and the effectiveness of Independent Reviewing Officer service in ensuring the local authority as a corporate parent discharges its statutory responsibilities towards looked after children.

This report draws on evidence from the views of children and young people, carers, and professionals from the local authority and from partner agencies.

The report will be presented to the Children's Services Management team, Children and Families Leadership team, Corporate Parenting Panel, Manchester Safeguarding Children's Board (MSCB) and an easy read version will be created for The Group (formerly known as the Care 2 Change Council).

The Group have contributed feedback to this report and stated:

**“Children and young people need their Independent Reviewing Officer to check things are going okay for them and to make sure they are getting good care and help”.**

**“Independent Reviewing Officers do a good job when they take time to get to know what is important to the children and young people and understand what is working well and what is not”.**

**“Young people need to understand what their Independent Reviewing Officer Job is so they can get the best from them”.**

Please note that data provided in this report for 2015/16 is provisional pending year end validation processes and submission to and publication by the Department for Education.

## SERVICE AND LEGAL CONTEXT

The purpose of the Independent Reviewing Officer role is to ensure that the care plan for the looked after child fully reflects the child's needs and that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration.

The appointment by local authorities of an Independent Reviewing Officer is a statutory requirement. The Children and Young Person's Act 2008, followed by revised care planning regulations and guidance which came into force in April 2011, strengthened the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer who is not only responsible for chairing statutory reviews but also for monitoring cases on an ongoing basis.

The Independent Reviewing Officer service in Manchester sits within the Safeguarding and Improvement Unit and is managed independently of children's social work line management and is therefore offering an appropriate level of independence that enables the service to effectively challenge plans, arrangements and the practice of the local authority. The strategic lead for the service reports directly to the Director of Children's Services. Independent Reviewing Officers have no involvement in preparing a child's care plan, management of the case and/or allocation of resources to looked after children.

The Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook sets out the statutory roles and duties as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of Local Authorities in establishing an effective Independent Reviewing Officer service.

Manchester Children's Services aspires to have a fully effective Independent Reviewing Officer service and is demonstrating this by:

- Creating a culture and climate within the local authority that values the Independent Reviewing Officer service and encourages and expects robust child-centred scrutiny; expects and is receptive to challenge.
- Giving Independent Reviewing Officers the professional status and respect, by resourcing the service properly and by openly giving them 'permission' to challenge.
- Equipping Independent Reviewing Officers with the right skills, particularly the ability to communicate with children and young people, and to know how and when to challenge.
- Providing access to expert advice, including the provision of independent legal advice.
- Supporting a dispute resolution protocol that works effectively, from informal conversations to the escalation of cases to senior management and CAFCASS if necessary.
- Ensuring Independent Reviewing Officers practice in a child-centred way and who demonstrate their commitment to each child and work out the best way to seek their views.

***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.***

***Mr Justice Peter Jackson  
Family Division Liaison Judge for the Northern Circuit  
NCB The role of IROs in England final Report 2014***

By ensuring continuous improvement of the Independent Reviewing Officer service, it is making a significant contribution to the Children's Service Vision 2015.

***“When best and safest for children to live in their family” or “When it is the best and safest option: ensure high quality alternative care is provided for children”***

## **2.1 Profile of the Independent Reviewing Service in Manchester**

After a period of instability with a number of interim Heads of Services a permanent Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding took up post in October 2015. The Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding supported by a Service Lead and two Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Managers is providing management stability along with vision and leadership for the service on its continuous improvement journey.

Manchester has 19 full time Independent Reviewing Officers who are managed by two Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Managers. The service has been arranged so that Independent Reviewing Officers in Manchester no longer have a generic chairing role. I.e. their focus is on Looked After Children and they do not undertake the role of child protection conference chair

The Independent Reviewing Officer team remained relatively stable during 2015/2016 and consistency and continuity was offered to look after Children; only one Independent Reviewing Officer left the service in this reporting period.

The Independent Reviewing Officer team has a reasonable balance of very experienced Independent Reviewing Officers and those newer to the role. The profile of the team is diverse being balanced with male and female workers and diversity of ethnicity backgrounds. This helps in reflecting the diversity of the Looked After Children population.

## **2.2 Independent Reviewing Officer Capacity**

Over the last two years seven additional Independent Reviewing Officer posts have been recruited to, enabling the Independent Reviewing Officer's caseloads to be reduced significantly. A national benchmarking survey completed in December 2013 identified that the average caseload for Independent Reviewing Officers ranged between 50 and 95. In Manchester, the average caseload for Independent Reviewing Officers in 2015/16 was 65. This is a significant reduction from previous case loads that had been in excess of 100 and now fall within the recommended number of 50 - 70 as outlined in the Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook.

Concerns had arisen historically that Independent Reviewing Officers did not have sufficient oversight or make appropriate challenge when the local authority when practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children is poor and not in children's best interests.

The Ofsted Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers that took place in July 2014 stated, "Independent Reviewing Officers and conference chairs do not challenge poor social work practice effectively. Some conferences and reviews do not receive social work reports and the allocated worker does not attend. These meetings, and consequently the outcomes, are compromised as a result". In highlighting areas requiring improvement Ofsted stated Manchester needed to improve the effectiveness of the independent reviewing officer service, particularly in relation to listening to the views of children, the rigour of challenge that is given to care plans and the process of escalation where there are continuing concerns about practice and progress of plans.

Ofsted published a thematic inspection of the IRO role within ten local authorities in 2013. They found that:

*'... independent reviewing officers are not making enough positive impact on the quality of care planning and outcomes for looked after children. They have been too slow in taking on their enhanced responsibilities.'* (Ofsted, 2013)

High cases loads had been a barrier to the service achieving the required standards. With restored capacity Independent Reviewing Officers have been able to re-establish their key tasks and functions and there is an improving picture in relation to consultation with and visits to children prior to their reviews. There is increasingly more consistent use of dispute resolution activity and oversight of cases between Reviews. In summary the service is now able to provide a more effective and practice independent review of care planning, practice and arrangements.

This report illustrates the development and improvements that have been achieved in the Independent Reviewing Officer Service during 2015/2016.

### **2.3 Supervision and training**

Independent Reviewing Officers receive monthly supervision and have access to informal supervision as and when needed. There is a real commitment by the management of the service to ensure that the level of supervision and support to Independent Reviewing Officers is of the highest standard. Supervision is now being monitored and current levels of formal supervision offered on a monthly basis has been on average 87.0% in the last three months of 2015/2016.

### **2.4 Independent Reviewing Officer Learning and Development**

In 2015/2016 there was not a formal learning and development plans for Independent Reviewing Officers. Human Resources Organisational Development has supported the service to undertake training needs analysis. This has been undertaken using Information gained from an Independent Reviewing Officer self-evaluation, annual appraisal, statutory and local requirements, Local Government Association Peer Review and OFSTED observations.

The following areas for training and development, alongside the recommendations from this report that will be used to populate a training program.

- Legal updates
- Impact of new legislation and requirements
- Evidence based and confident decision making
- Negotiation skills/assertive/how to communicate better and challenge people with different views
- Reinforcing core values/expectations
- Report writing skills/analysing data
- Chairing meetings, managing meetings/effective facilitation of meetings
- Managing conflict
- Voice of the child/child centred view
- Communicating with disabled children with lack of lingual ability
- SMART planning
- Engagement with adults who have mental health issues
- Strengths Based Conversation Training/Signs Of Safety

In addition the service has introduced a programme of Service Development Days that will take place three times a year, January, May and September each year.



## 2. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE “FRONT AND CENTRE”

Manchester Children’s Services is committed to placing children and young people front and centre to everything that we do.

The Children’s Board provides overall leadership for the shaping and delivering the vision for children, young people and their families; which is **‘Our Manchester - building a safe, happy, healthy and successful future for children and young people’**.

A Voice of Children and Young People Framework is an integral part of our Quality Assurance Framework. This framework sets our commitment to ensuring children and young people remain front and centre of everything we do and expect clear and immediately accessible information about the child or young person, their views and ascertainable wishes and feelings.

The overall purpose of this Voice of the Children and Young People Framework is to:

- Outline expectations in relation to how we will engage with children and young people to elicit their views and ascertainable wishes and feelings.
- Ensure roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and to strengthen lines of accountability.
- To ensure the views of children and young people influence the care and services they receive and service development.
- Bring about improved outcomes for children, young people and their families by improving professional practice and the quality of service delivery.

We aspire to be an outstanding Independent Reviewing Officer service that is fiercely child centred and strives to ensure the local authority meets its statutory responsibilities and that practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children are of a consistently good quality.

The Independent Reviewing Officer role is central to building an outstanding Children’s Services in which “our” children have the best experience and life opportunities.

The Independent Reviewing Officer service has the role to examine and challenge where needed to ensure that Manchester Children’s Services are fulfilling that commitment along with fulfilling “Our Promise” (Pledge) to our Looked after children (appendix 1.)

We driving continuous development and improvement by:

- Placing children and young people at the centre of everything we do ensuring their rights, needs and welfare is promoted.
- Ensuring children and young people’s voice is consistently heard and influences, practice plans and arrangements for them and service development and improvement.
- Creating the conditions in which strong positive relationships can be developed between the Independent Reviewing Officer and the looked after child.
- Exploring more creative ways in which the child or young person can participate in care planning and reviews.

- Developing SMART care plans and pathway plans that are clear, accessible and understood by our children and all caring for them.
- Having plans that are robustly reviewed both at review meetings and the period between them, to ensure they are delivering the outcomes in a timely manner, adapted and changed when needed.
- Respecting our children and young people, they are shown the priority they deserve and have a right to quality reports and plans that identify both the needs and outcomes along with their wishes and feelings.
- Seeking assurance that our children and young people are receiving the best of care and that their right to regular health and dental checks, personal education plans and a passport.
- A service that will robustly challenge any areas of poor practice exhausting all stages of the Dispute Resolution and powers to have the child's needs met promptly.

### 3.1 Corporate Parenting Panel

The lead member is proactively ensuring the Council and its partners as corporate parents are demonstrating a strong commitment to ensuring:

***'A child who is looked after by the Council or a care leaver has the right to expect everything from a corporate parent that would be expected from a responsible and good parent'.***

The purpose of the Corporate Parenting Panel is to ensure the Council with its partners effectively discharges its responsibilities as Corporate Parents to all children and young people looked after and care leavers.

As a Corporate Parent to all children and young people looked after and care leavers the Council and its partners must act as a responsible and good parent would act.

Every good parent:

- Ensures their children are kept safe and have a secure and stable environment in which to grow and thrive
- Supports their children to remain healthy and promotes their emotional well-being and resilience.
- Protects their children from harm and ensures they know how to keep themselves safe and are supported to cope with the dangers and challenges life presents.
- Hold high aspirations for their children's future and wants the bests for their children and encourages and supports them to attend education regularly and reach their potential.
- Nurtures their children and prepares and supports their transition to adult life promoting their economic prospects and preparing them to become responsible citizens.
- Recognises, celebrate and shares in their achievements and celebrates them.
- Listens to their children views and ensures they are taken into account.

The corporate parenting panel is well represented by the Council, its partners and members of the Children in Care Council (The Group) and The Care Leavers Council (The Change Group) and is influencing development and improvement in services.

The Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding has responsibility as the strategic lead for Corporate Parenting.

### **3.2 Children's Rights**

Coram Voice has delivered our Children's Rights Service since 1 November 2015; advocacy and Independent Visitors.

Between 1<sup>st</sup> November and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016 advocacy services were offered to 89 children and young people who were supported to address 104 issues.

### **3.3 Complaints**

During 2015/2016 there were 12 formal complaints made by looked after children and young people.

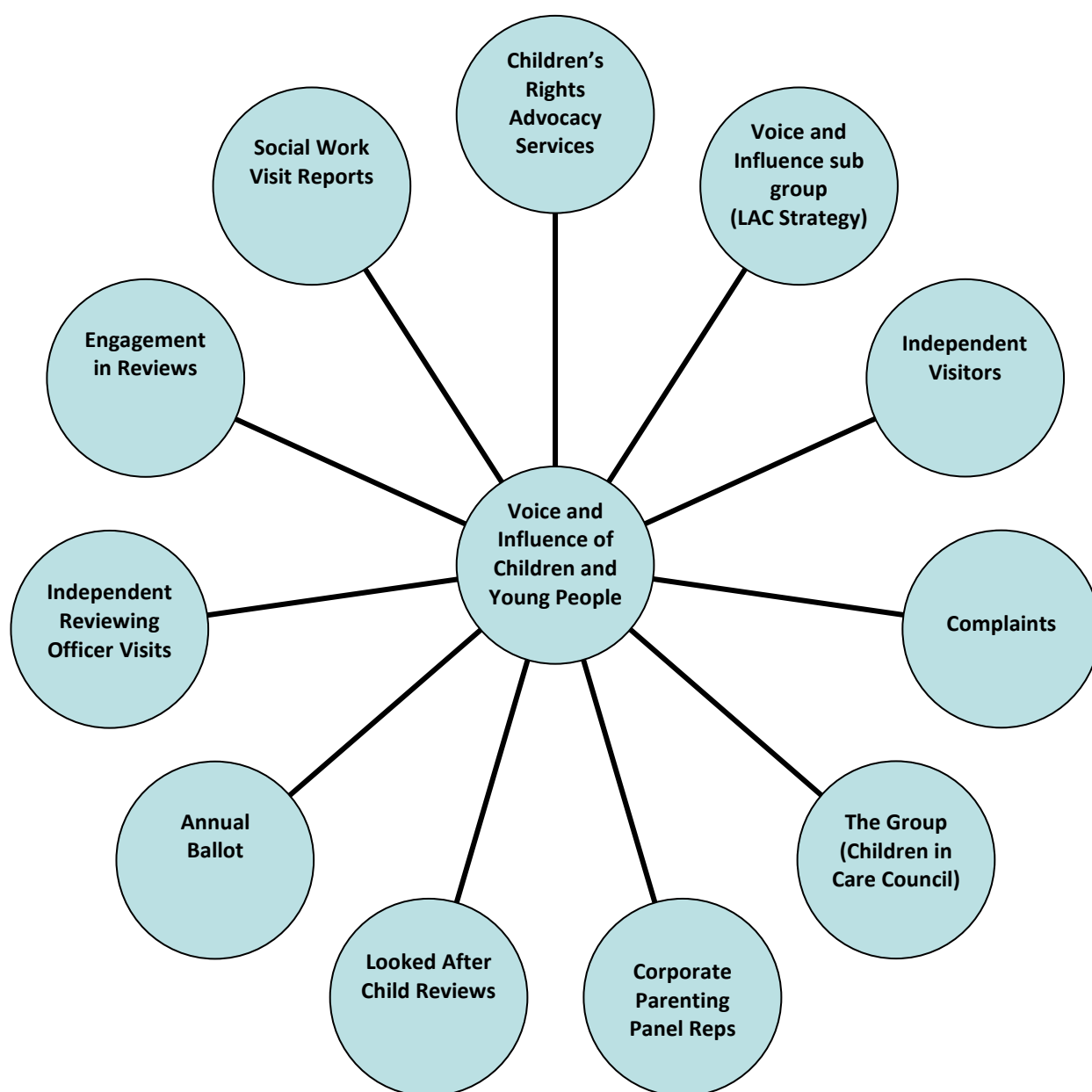
Issues raised by looked after children and young people are examined in Section 4 of this report Voice and Influence of Children and Young People.

#### 4. VOICE AND INFLUENCE OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Looked After Children in Manchester are being offered meaningful opportunities to contribute their views and opinions. Having a voice and influence means that children and young people have the opportunity to participate in decisions and activities that shape and influence practice, policies and services that can impact on their lives.

In 2015/2016 a Voice of Children and Young People Framework was developed that outlines the opportunities for professionals to listen to and seek the views of children and young people. This Framework includes a learning and improvement cycle aimed at ensuring what children and young people tell us about their experience of being after influences practice and service development and improvement for them and others.

The following diagram outlines the different ways Independent Reviewing Officers hear about the views of children and young people and understand what is important to them.



During 2015/2016 children and young people told us the following things were important to them:

We were told...	We did.....	How are we doing....
<p><b>Young people told us they were fed up of offering us feedback and seeing nothing change as a result.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We acknowledged that we need to do much better and have refreshed our Promise to children and young people.</li> <li>➤ We have strengthened The Group and the voice and influence they have. We track what we are told and are striving to improve practice and services based on the feedback offered.</li> <li>➤ Young people are now represented at the Corporate Parenting Panel, co-chair the Voice and Influence sub group.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We can now better demonstrate that the voice of children and young people is being heard and that this is improving practice and services as a result. We need to continue in our efforts to bring about further development and improvement.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Children and young people told us that they often struggle to get through to their social workers on the phone and that they do not always get timely call backs.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We have actively reviewed current telephone arrangements and ensured a contact details were up to date.</li> <li>➤ We have given clear advice to social workers and have told them we expected them to make sure children and young people know how to contact them and that they phone them back within 24 hours if they are not available when they call.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We are not satisfied yet that this area of practice has improved enough. We have agreed with our young people to keep this under review until we are sure this is not a problem anymore.</li> <li>➤ We are working with The Group (Children in Care Council) and will be delivering induction and other training to our social workers aimed at highlighting this issues and improved understanding of the importance of it from a child and young persons perspective.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Young people have told us they want us to offer them better explanations about life changing decisions.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ This has been addressed via briefings to Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers and is an integral part of our expected practice standards.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We will continue to monitor any feedback offered and seek to improve practice. Engagement with children and young people, information sharing and how well their views and opinions are taken into account is</li> </ul>

		a thread that runs through all audit activity.
<b>Young people have told us they want fewer placements moves and more choice about placements.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We have provided clear messages about the importance of stable placements. At the end of 2015/2016 the % of Looked After Children with 3 or more placements during the year was 7.5%. We are performing better than all statistical comparators'.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We will continue to monitor practice in this area and will seek to reduce disruption to children and young people.</li> <li>➤ We will review the individual case circumstances as an when young people raise concerns.</li> </ul>
<b>Young people are experiencing too many changes in their named social worker and details of the changes are not being communicated.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We have raised this as an important practice issue and we have reminded managers that changes to social worker or Independent Reviewing Officers should only be made when it is absolutely necessary and unavoidable.</li> <li>➤ We are reviewing the child's journey through our system and making sure we reduce the number of changes a child or young person experiences. Independent Reviewing Officers have been asked to keep a close eye on this.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We are working hard to retain staff and minimise the need for children and young people to have a change in their allocated worker unless absolutely unavoidable.</li> <li>➤ This area of practice is closely monitored via our Improvement Board tracker and performance has improved to 28.1% in March 2016 from its highest point of 32.9%.in November 2016.</li> </ul>
<b>Children and young people want more regular contact with their families and friends.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We have asked Social Workers, Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure contact arrangements are kept under close review and to ensure the wishes and feelings of individual children and young people are understood in relation to this.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Contact arrangements will be kept under close review and we will scrutinise any further concerns raised by children and young people in order to understand if there is any learning we can take from this.</li> <li>➤ We will draft a young persons statement aimed at influencing practice.</li> </ul>
<b>Children and young people do not always feel as involved in their reviews as they want to be.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Independent Reviewing Officers are now required to meet with children and young people in the six weeks prior to their reviews so they can</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ This will continue to be a priority development area in 2016/2017. At the 2015/2016 year end in March 2016 performance was</li> </ul>

	<p>ascertain their wishes and feelings and consult them on the agenda and who they want to attend their reviews amongst other things.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Independent Reviewing Officers have been reminded about the importance of children and young people participating and being engaged.</li> </ul>	<p>38.9%. A target for 2016/2017 will be set when comparator data has been considered.</p>
<p><b>Young people find the minutes of meetings are not always easy to read and understand</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Independent Reviewing Officers are starting to create more child and young person friendly/easy read review minutes.</li> <li>➤ Information available to children and young people is being reviewed to ensure it is consistently easy read and accessible to children and young people. Children and young people will be consulted on all new information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ This will continue to be a priority development area in 2016/2017. We will support Independent Reviewing Officers to develop their skills in this area.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Young people reported frustrations at missing lessons in order to attend reviews and PEP meetings</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We have spoken to the Head of the Virtual School who has communicated this feedback to schools.</li> <li>➤ Independent Reviewing Officers have been reminded that they should always consult with children and young people about where reviews are held. Reviews should not be held at school unless the child or young person specifically asks for them to be and in these circumstances this should not disrupt their learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We will monitor this area of practice.</li> </ul>

The Independent Reviewing Officer service is committed to listening to the voice of looked after children and enabling them to influence and shape practice and service development. During 2015/2016 positive steps have been taken by the service to listen effectively to the voice of children and young people and to respond to the issues raised. We recognise that continued improvement is required and that we will need to revisit some issues to ensure changes are embedded.

## 5. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN POPULATION DATA 1 APRIL 2015 - 31 MARCH 2016

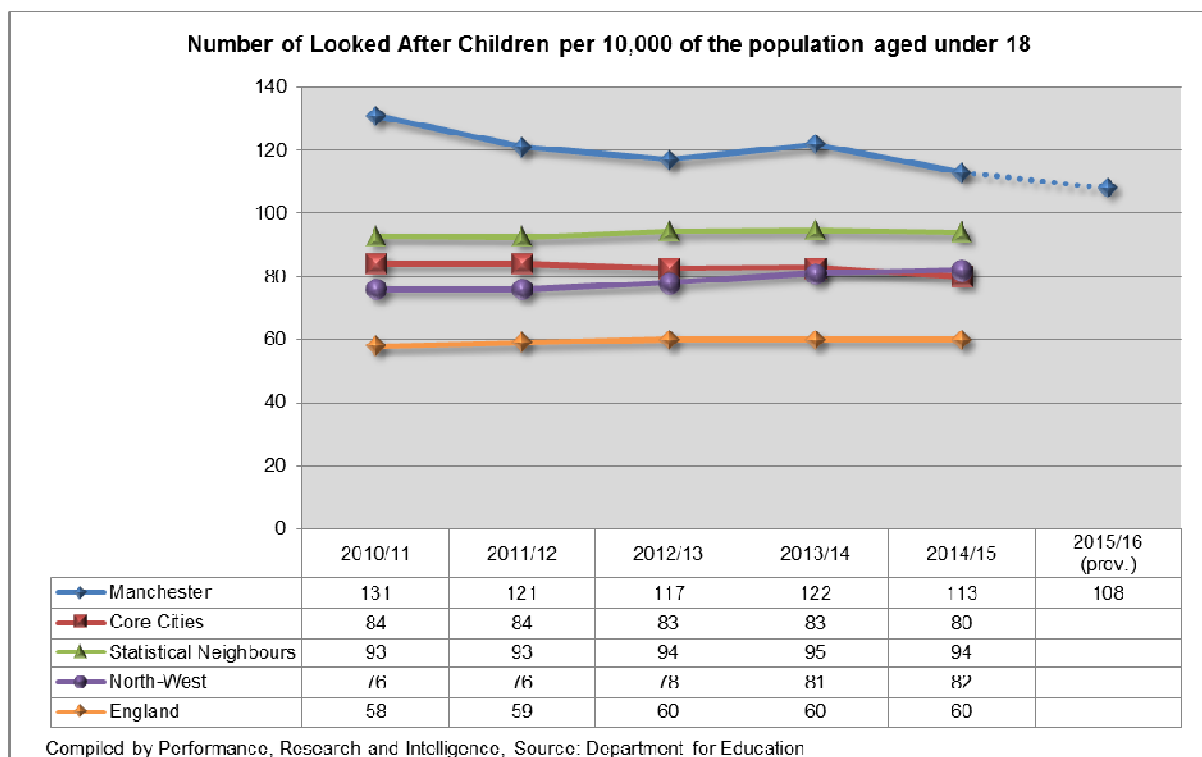
### 5.1 Looked After Children Population

Number of Looked After Children												
Year	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2014/15	1375	1385	1398	1403	1380	1386	1380	1368	1344	1324	1307	1297
2015/16	1294	1275	1273	1278	1266	1276	1270	1268	1254	1239	1240	1237

Provisional data as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016 Manchester City Council had 1237 Looked After Children. This is a decrease of 60 on the numbers of Looked After Children in the previous year.

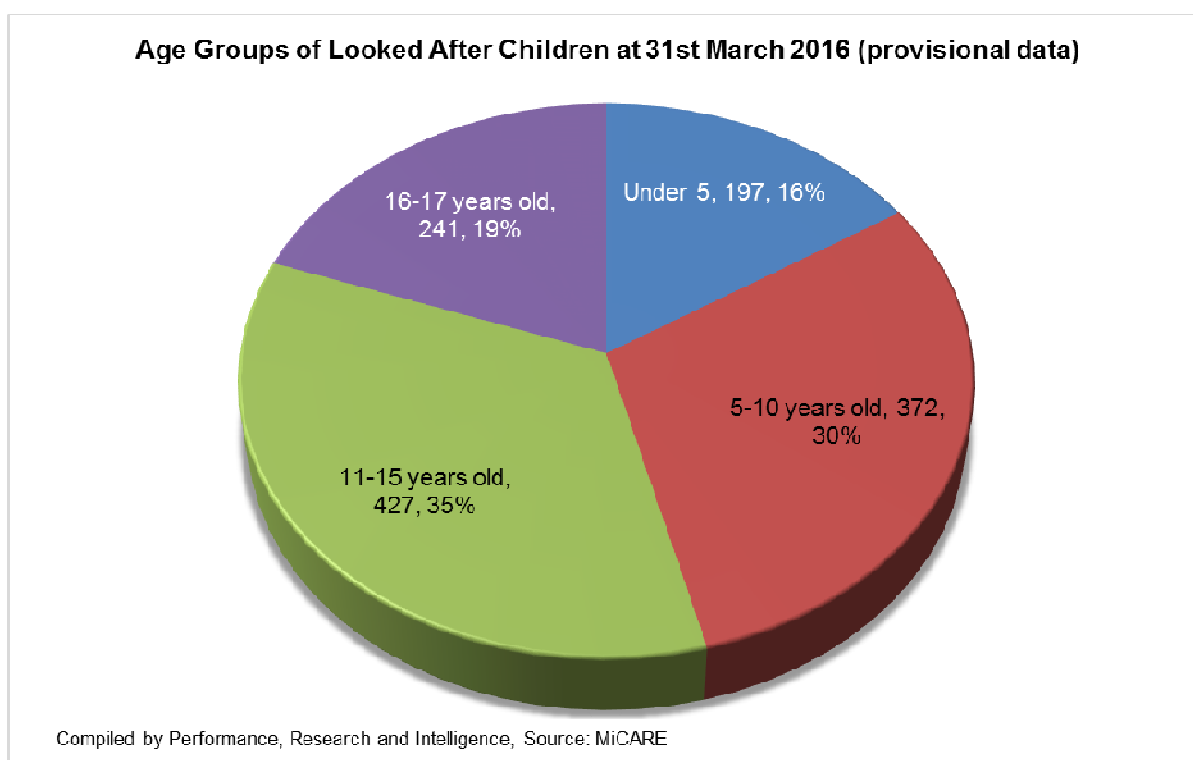
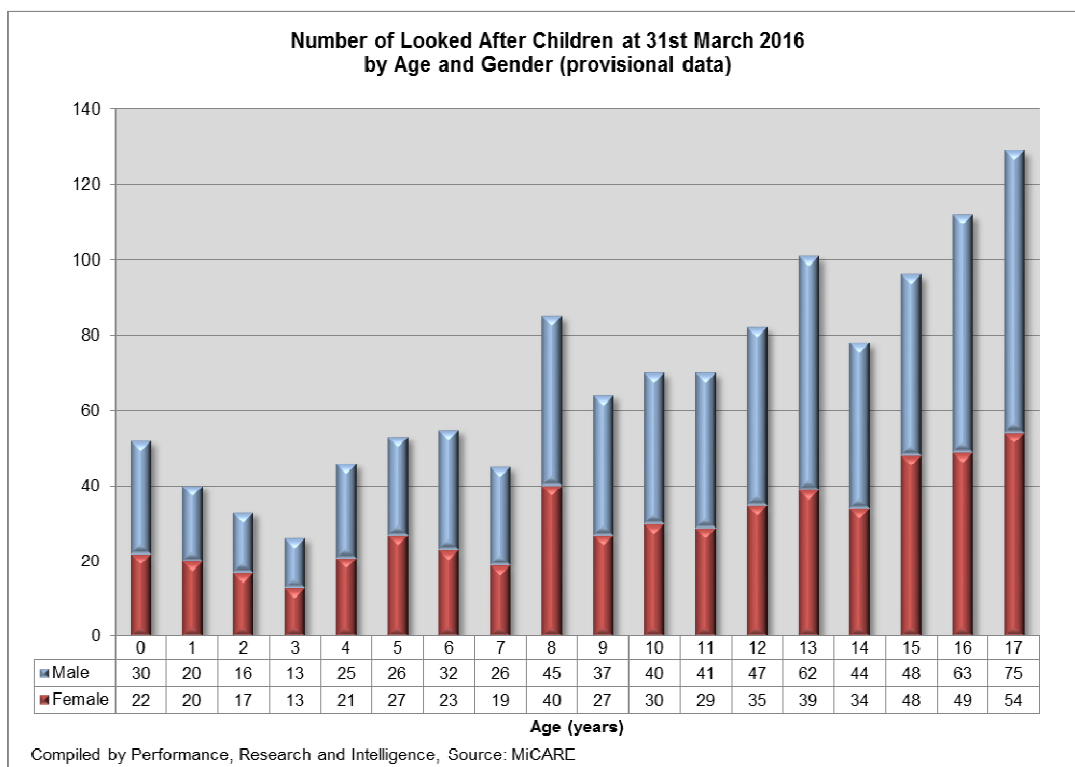
As the table demonstrates, the number of Looked After Children started off high but there has been a gradual safe reduction since April 2015 when there was 1294. The numbers have fluctuated between 1237 and 1294 over the last 12 months with a monthly average of 1264. In March 2016 compared to April 2014 there had been a gradual safe reduction of 138 children. The work on strengthening the 'front door' via Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), a greater focus on children subject to Section 20, Care Orders at home and increased scrutiny by Independent Reviewing Officers have contributed to this safe decrease in numbers.

Despite the reduction there is still a higher number of Looked After Children in Manchester compared to statistical comparator rates for 2014/15 (most recent data available). The provisional rate of children looked after (per 10,000 population) at the end of 2015/2016 was 108, which is high compared to the Statistical neighbour rate at 94, North West average rate at 82, Core City rate at 80 and the England average rate at 60. The long term target is to achieve a safe reduction in our number of looked after children to the Core City rate.



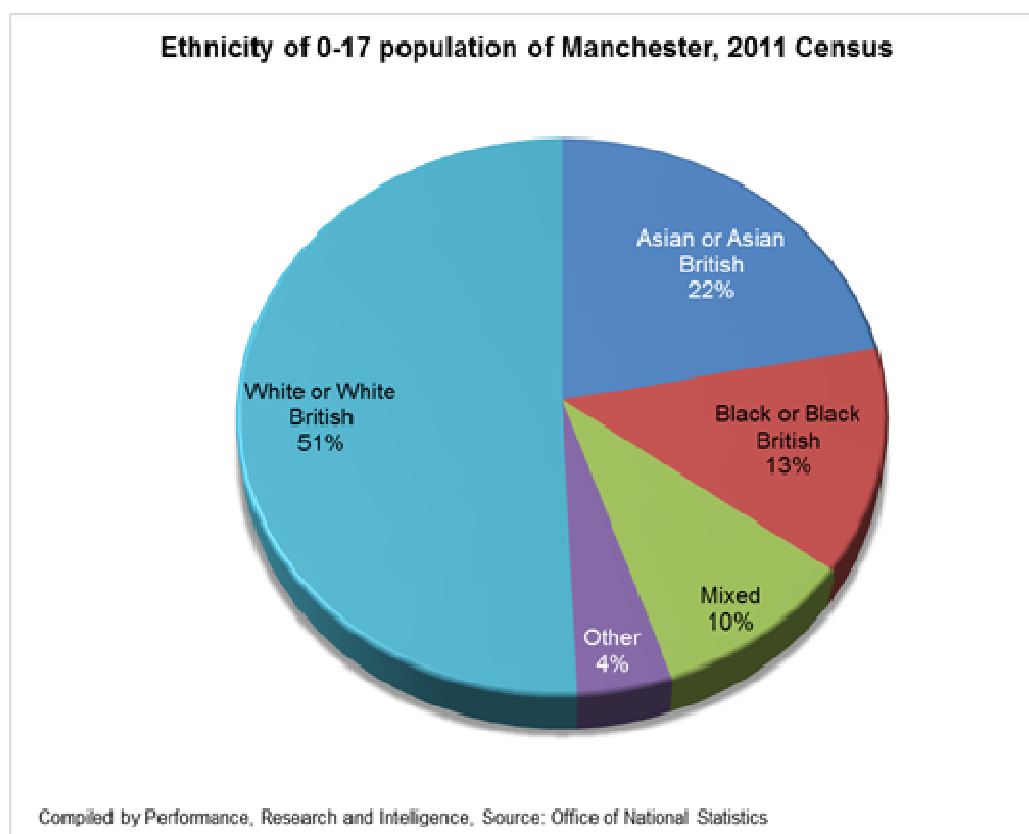
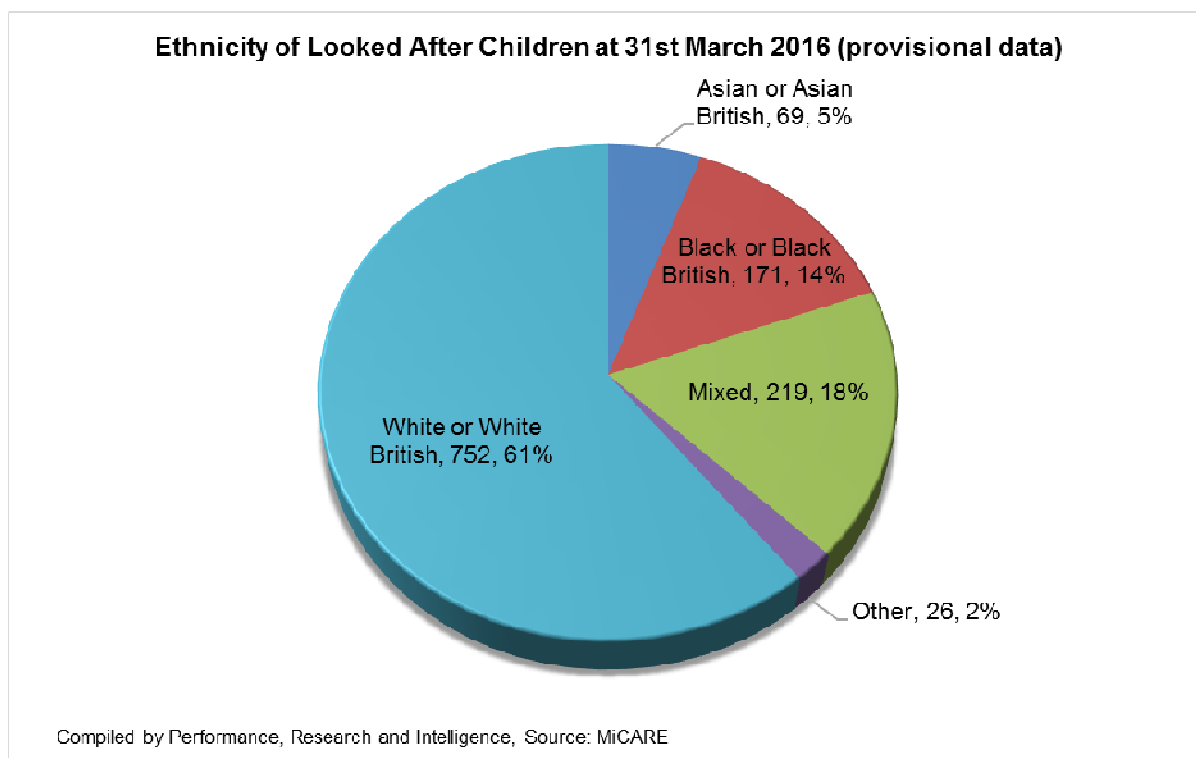


### 5.2 Age and Gender of Looked After Children as at 31 March 2016



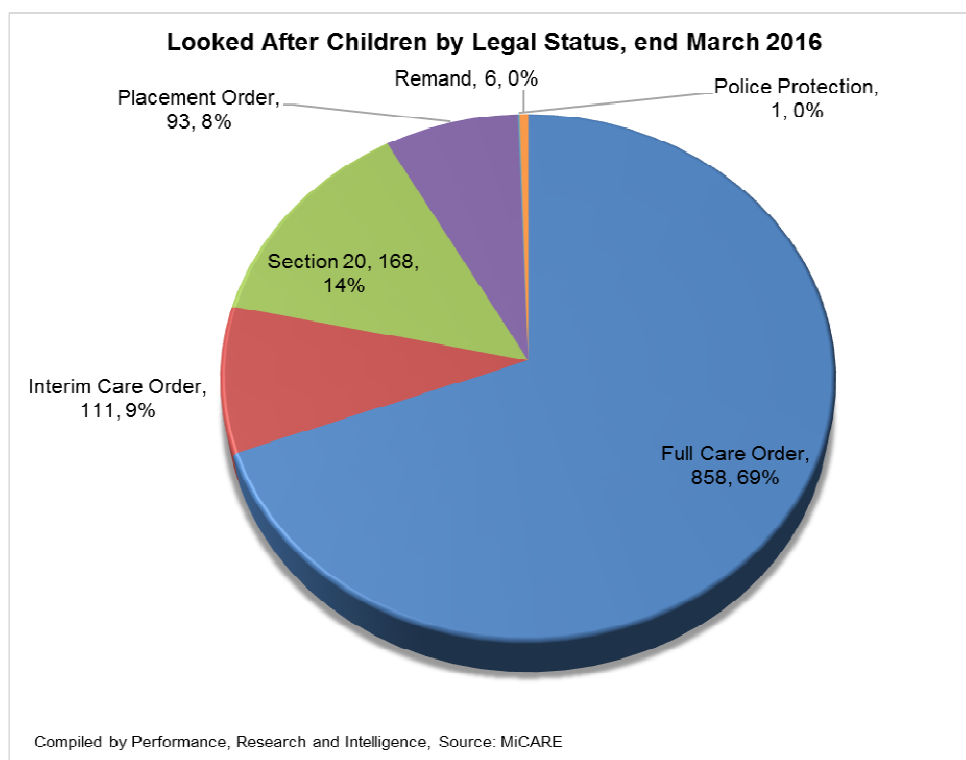
The children and young people with the highest representation are those aged between 11 and 15 years. During 2016/2017 we will be undertaking a thematic review of cases in order to understand the reason why there are 142 more boys looked after than girls.

### 5.3 Ethnicity of Looked After Children as of 31 March 2016

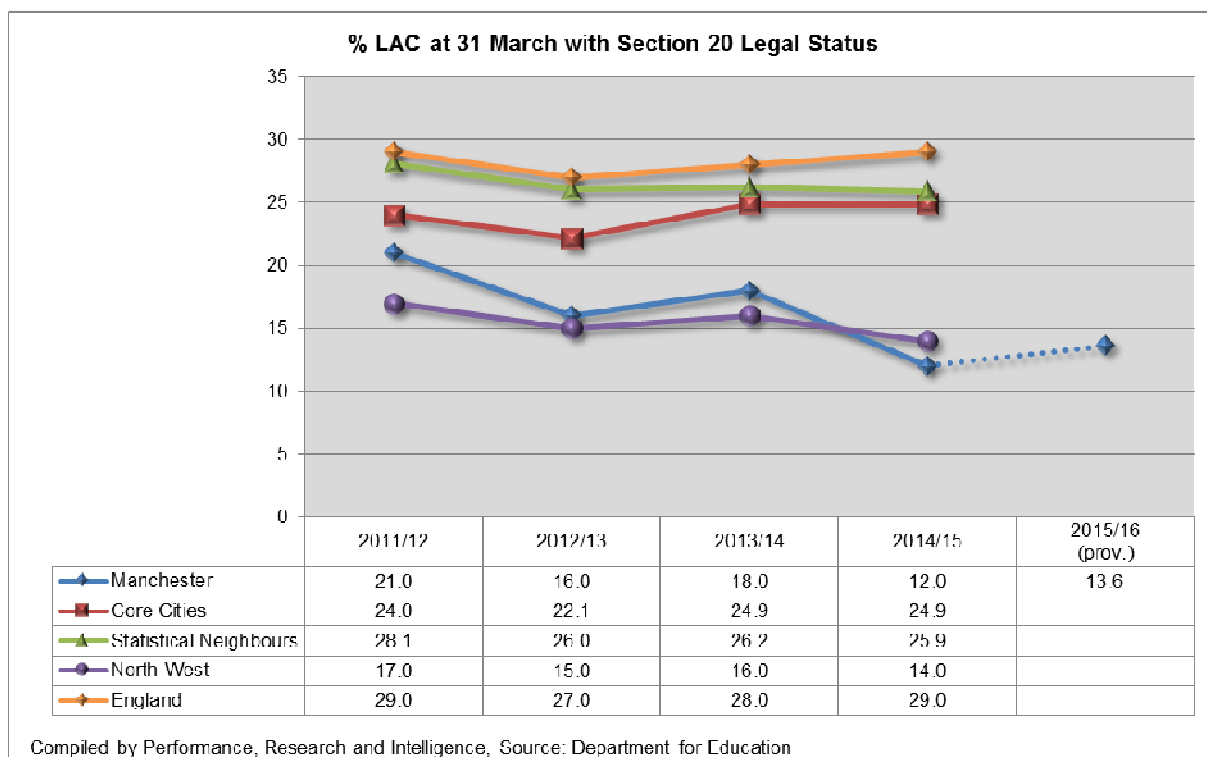


The majority of Looked After Children are of White British ethnicity. The ethnic breakdown of the LAC population has remained stable over the last few years. Information on the ethnicity of the wider child population of Manchester is below and whilst out of date as it is from the 2011 Census, it does suggest an under-representation of Asian or Asian British children in the care system.

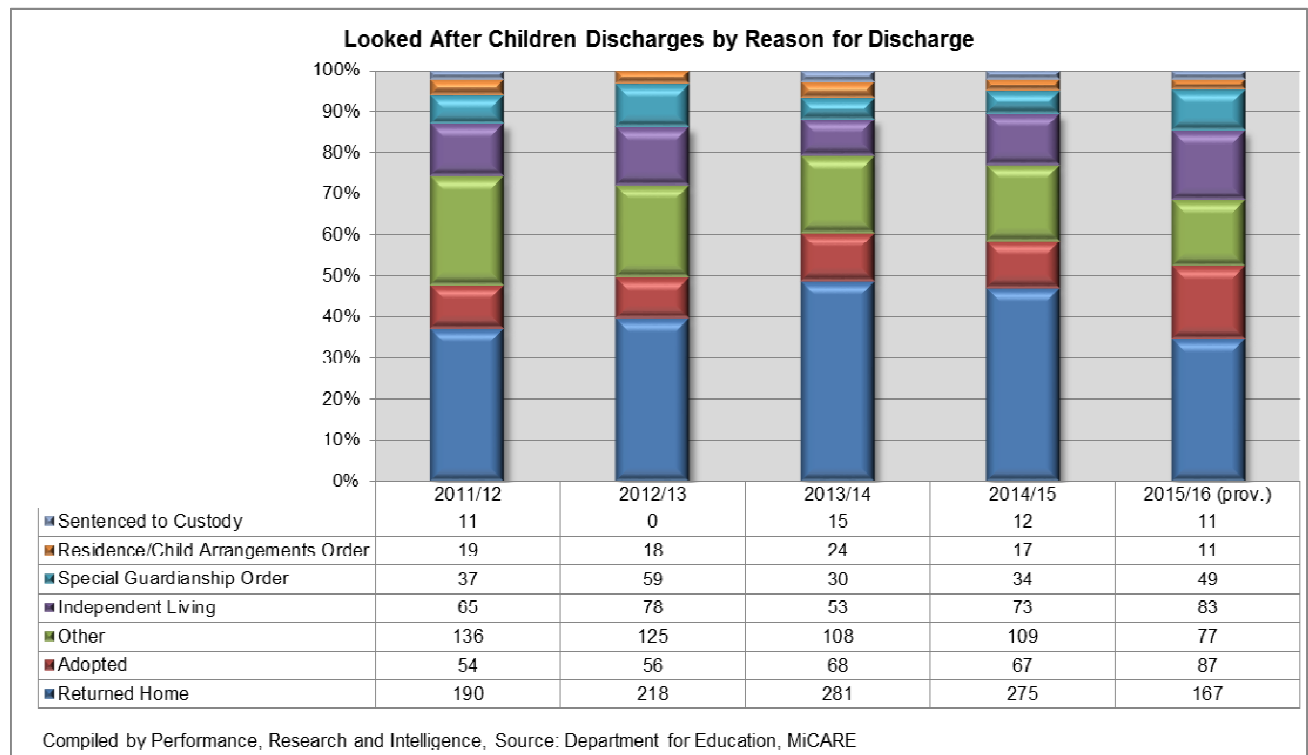
### 5.4 Legal status of Looked After Children at 31 March 2016



At 31st March 2016 there were 168 (13.6%) of children with a single period of accommodation under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. The table below shows that the percentage of children subject to Section 20 published by the Department for Education at the year end of 2014/2015 to be 12.0% which is lower but similar to the North West average at 14.0% but significantly lower than the Core Cities at 24.9%, Statistical Neighbours at 25.9% and the England average at 29.0%.



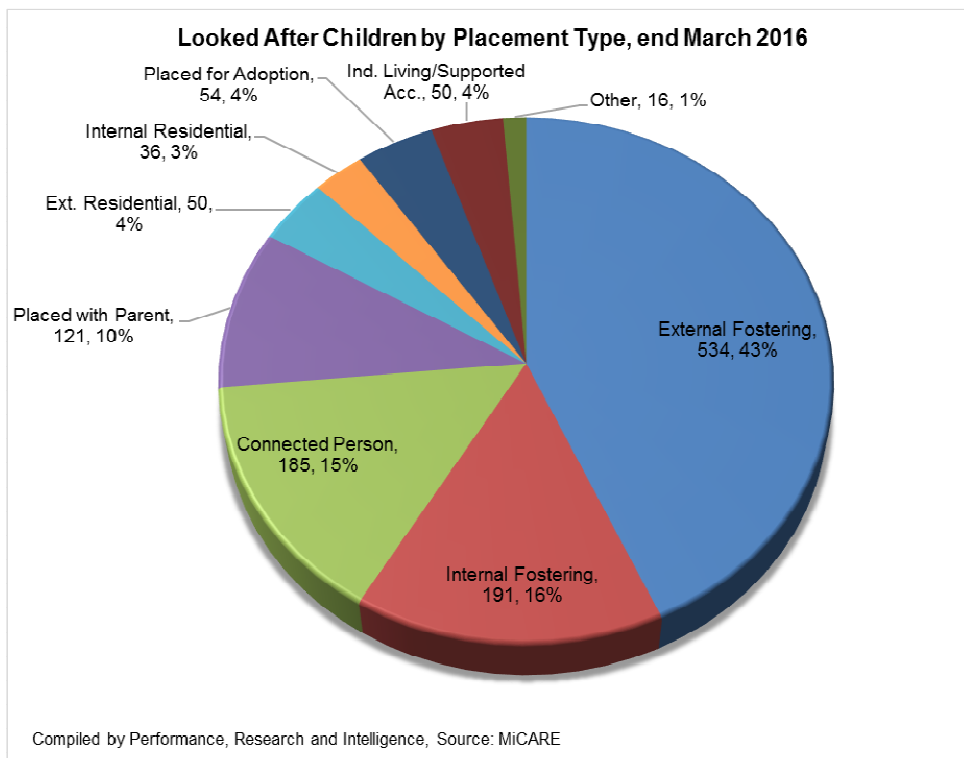
Independent Reviewing Officers continue to ensure that young people who are accommodated under this legal status do not drift within the care system and that a clear and timely permanence plan is assured via the Review process. The increased scrutiny between Looked After Children Reviews and the use of the Dispute Resolution Protocol is assisting in ensuring planning for individual children and young people are within their timescale. Additionally, the Placement Panel which is held weekly oversees the progress of Section 20 cases and reviews cases within particular cohorts such as children placed at home subject to Care Orders.



The profile in terms of children leaving care in 2015/16:

- **34% Returned home**
- **16% Care ceased for any other reason.**
- **18% Adopted**
- **17% independent living**
- **10% Special Guardianship Order**
- **2% Residence / Child Arrangements Order granted.**
- **2% Sentenced to custody**

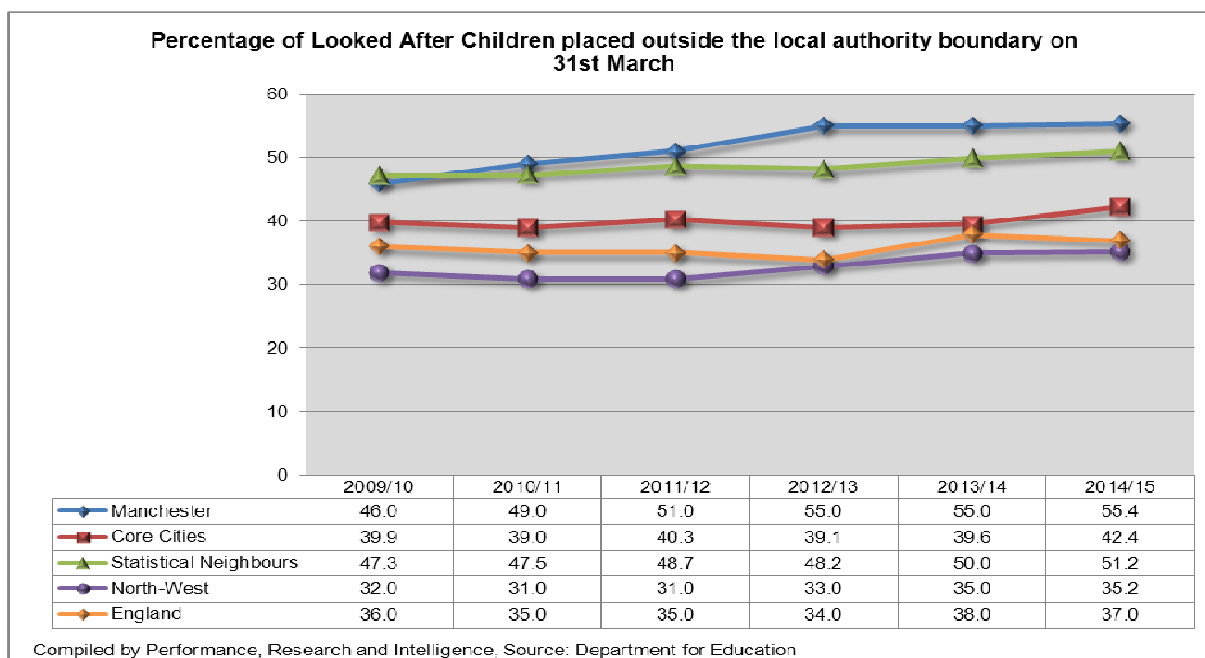
### 5.5 Looked After Children Placements



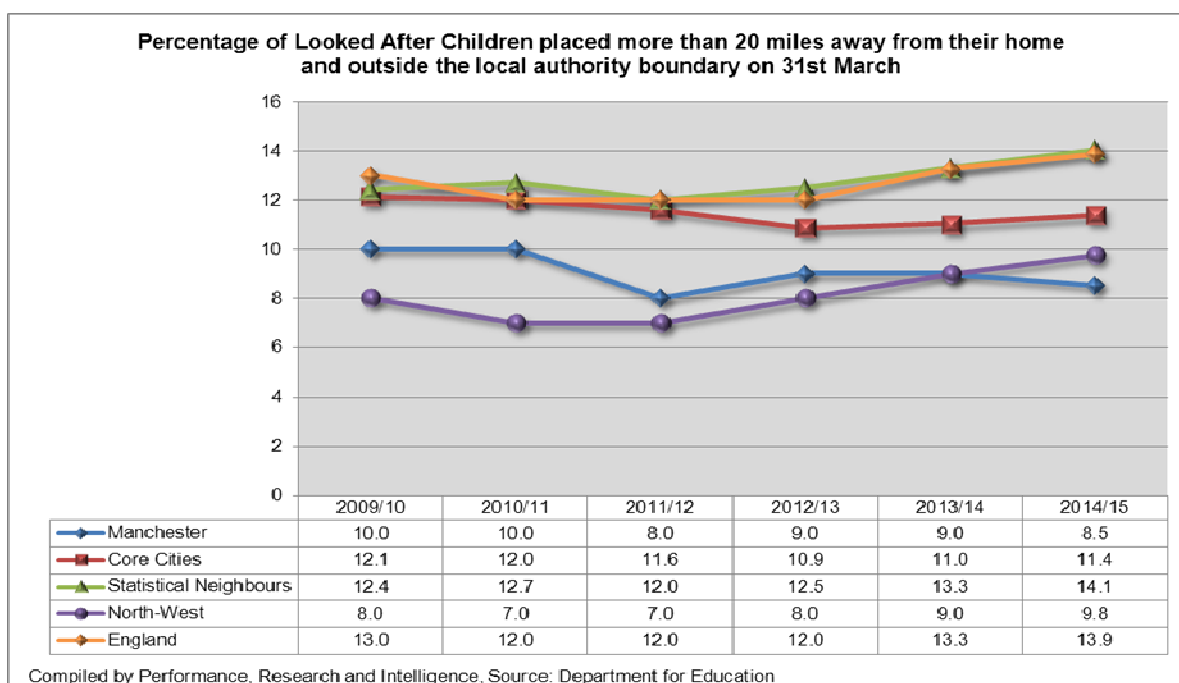
The above table provides a breakdown according to Looked After Children placement type and shows that the majority of children and young people are placed in foster care. The Independent Reviewing Officer must pay particular attention to planning and arrangements for those children who are placed at home with parents or in a Secure Unit. The legal status of these children should be kept under close review in order to ensure Care Orders are discharged in a timely manner so as to avoid drift and delay and that the liberty of children is not restricted for any longer than is necessary.

### 5.6 Placement Location and Distance from Home

The table below illustrates that the percentage of Manchester LAC placed outside the Local Authority boundary has remained fairly stable for the last three years, higher than the England, Statistical Neighbour, North West Regional and Core City averages. Manchester is ranked 113<sup>th</sup> of 144 Local Authorities in this measure. Data for 2015/16 is not currently available.



Despite having a high percentage of children placed outside the Local Authority boundary, Manchester is much more in line with comparator local authorities for children placed less than 20 miles from their home, ranking 35<sup>th</sup> of 145 Local Authorities. Manchester's percentage is lower than the Core City and Regional averages but remains higher than the national and statistical neighbour averages.



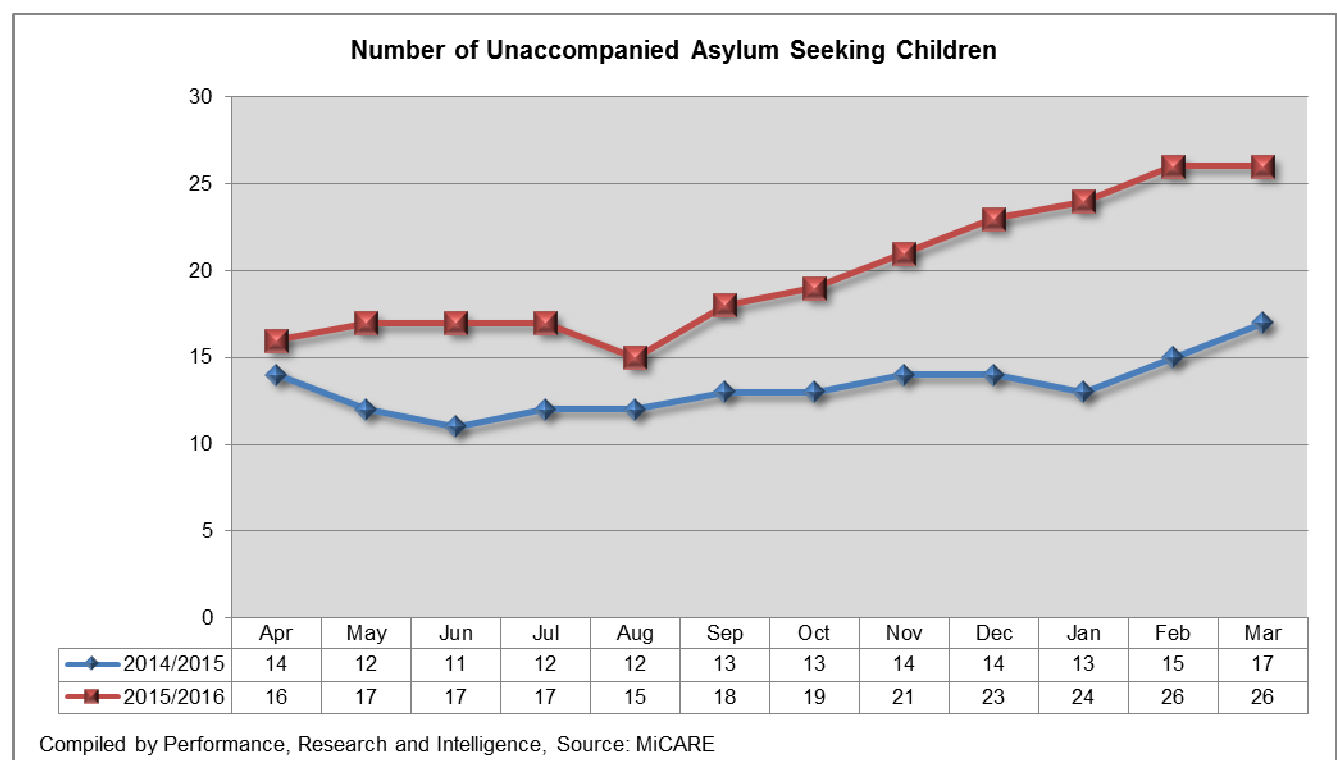
There were 106 children Placed with Parents at home on full Care Orders at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016. This raises concerns as it questions if the reunification is safe, if care planning and assessments of risk and needs are in place there should not be the need for an order, if this is not the case the placement may not be appropriate. A rehabilitation team has been created in Manchester and Independent Reviewing Officers work closely with this team to monitor and track progress cases where Care Orders need to be discharged. Independent Reviewing Officers will need to be more robust in their scrutiny and challenge when agreeing a return home, the need for the order or the safety of the rehabilitation.

### 5.7 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

The table below illustrates there has been an increase in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children over the last 12 months. There are nine more children in the cohort in March 2016 in comparison to March 2015. The numbers are likely to increase linked to Government policy and the international crisis on refugee and asylum seekers. There has been increased scrutiny of this cohort over the last 12 months, to ensure their needs are being met and their rights upheld.

The Independent Reviewing Officer linked to this cohort quality assures all of the cases and they have raised the profile of these children and young people in the Localities and have escalated concerns regarding their legal status and delays in Age Assessments being completed.

All Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children have access to an Independent Visitor; during 2016/2017 we hope to increase the number of children who choose to take this up.



## 6. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN STATUTORY REVIEWS

The team has made significant improvement in the timeliness of looked after children reviews. In 2015/2016 98.7% average of statutory reviews took place within timescale.

Year 2015/16	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
<b>Number of Reviews</b>	275	266	293	345	149	346	282	287	279	235	282	302
<b>Reviews in Timescale</b>	275	262	290	345	146	342	278	284	279	233	279	302
<b>Percentage</b>	100	99	99	100	98	99%	99	99	100	99	99	100

This information was not accurately collected in 2014/2015.

Where the Review has taken place out of timescale this was linked to Initial Looked After Child Reviews and a late Looked After Child notifications being received from the allocated Social Worker.

Cases are allocated to Independent Reviewing Officers within 24 hours of notification. Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to arranging the initial Reviews within the 20 day timescale. This is evident in the performance data evidenced in the tables below.

### 6.1 Participation and Engagement of Children and Young People in Looked After Children Reviews

Year	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
<b>2015/2016</b>	87	89	95	90	45	110	87	82	85	88	101	101
<b>Percentage</b>	31.6	33.4	32.4	26.0	30.2	31.7	30.8	28.5	31.5	37.4	35.8	33.4

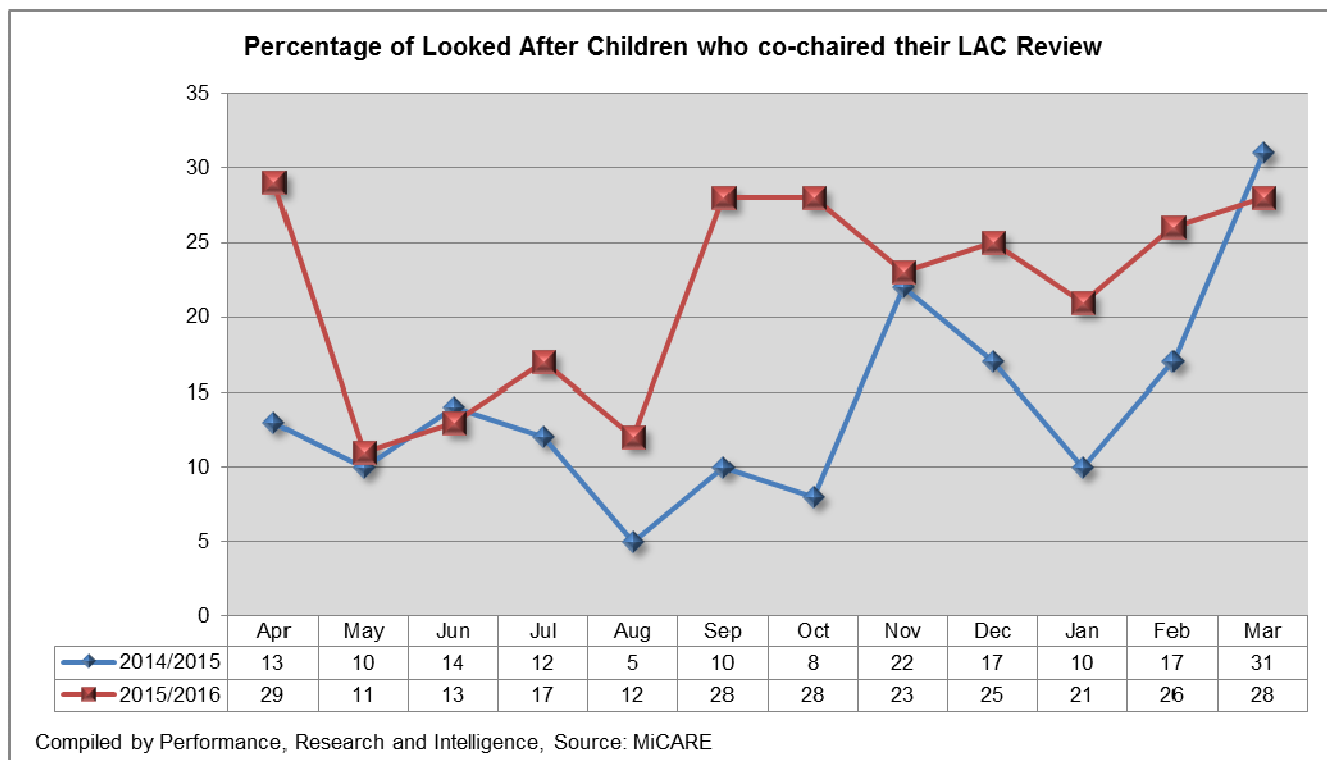
Participation and engagement of Looked After Children in their reviews is a high priority of the service. A period of high caseloads compromised this important area of practice and as a consequence the number of children and young people attending their review meetings is low. With the increased capacity, the improved practice of more home visits will contribute to improved engagement and participation in reviews

Participation includes attending and/or contributing to their Review either themselves or through an advocate. Further work is need to better understand what we are counting as participated and consider a feedback process the allows children and young people to comment on the experience to inform service developments.

Independent Reviewing Officers have supported and encouraged young people in chairing their own review or setting their own agendas wherever appropriate.

We have set a provisional target of 60.0% but we will be considering comparator data in relation to this target.





Young people co-chairing their Review meetings continues to be an improving picture. In 2015/2016, 261 reviews were co-chaired by the young person. This is an improvement when compared to 2014/15 where 169 young people co-chaired their own review meeting.

It is not an easy option for many young people to take on this role within a Review and requires considerable negotiation, planning and support from the Independent Reviewing Officers. It is anticipated that the numbers co-chairing will continue to rise as the Independent Reviewing Officers are more able to focus on engagement, participation, preparation and encouraging and equipping young people to co-chair their reviews. Alongside this as part of refreshing the service understanding and use of the “The Child’s Voice” – other creative ways will be explored and tested that increase the influence young people are able to exercise in their own review.

Independent Reviewing Officers routinely check whether children know about individual advocacy and how to make a complaint. They also check at Reviews whether an independent visitor is needed, and any communication needs requiring additional or specialist support.

It has been identified as a priority for this year’s development that there is room for further improvement by building on the Directorate Children and Young People Voice framework.

### 6.2 Permanence plans by second Looked After Child review.

The percentage of children with a second Looked After Child review where a permanence plan was agreed in March 2016 was 69.9% (107 out of 153). Independent Reviewing Officers are clear about their role and responsibilities to track permanence decisions as soon as the child becomes looked after and in-between the first and second looked after children reviews. Improvement in this area has been too variable throughout the year and requires improvement and Independent Reviewing Officers will be required to more robustly scrutinise this performance and offer challenge via the Dispute Resolution Protocol more consistently during 2016/2017. This area is considered further in the analysis of practice section later in this report.

## 7. DISPUTE RESOLUTION

The Independent Reviewing Officer has a statutory duty under the Children Act 1989, 25B (1) to ensure plans and arrangements for looked after children are consistent with their individual needs and welfare and that the local authority is fulfilling their legal responsibilities towards the child.

In accordance to the Independent Reviewing Officer's Handbook, escalations are vital to quality assure Care Plans and monitor the effectiveness of the service. Escalations can be issues, actions or questions that the Independent Reviewing Officer has raised within the review process but have not been addressed.

The Dispute Resolution protocol in Manchester has been reviewed: in the past it was not well understood across the service and it was used and responded to inconsistently. Consequently there was limited evidence of the Independent Reviewing Officers' footprint on children's files and the Safeguarding and Improvement Unit was not consistently demonstrating impact or influence.

In November 2015 the Dispute Resolution Protocol was reviewed and re-launched. The Key principles that underpin the Dispute Resolution Protocol are as follows:

- The rights, needs and welfare of children must remain central at all times.
- Managers at all levels, other professionals and Independent Reviewing Officers must endeavour to establish and maintain positive channels of communication at all times and should seek to resolve issues and concerns that arise about practice, plans and arrangements for children looked after informally wherever possible and in a timescale consistent with the child's welfare.
- Independent Reviewing Officers must ensure there is a record of all issues and concerns raised, action taken and agreements reached on the child's case file.
- Allocated social workers, manager at all levels and other professionals as appropriate must always respond promptly to issues and concerns raised.
- Other professionals as appropriate i.e. Legal team, Head of Virtual School, Designated LAC Nurse etc. as appropriate will be alerted to the issue and concern at any stage of the protocol if it is believed they have a role to play in resolving the particular issue or concern.
- When there are disagreements which need to be resolved quickly in order to safeguarding and promote the child's welfare. Professional judgement must always be used and the safety and wellbeing of a child or young person is paramount. In circumstances where there are immediate concerns or there is a delay in receiving a response at the varying stages of the protocol consideration should be given to by-passing stages and escalating sooner. This decision should be made in conjunction with the Service Lead for Safeguarding.

The protocol expects Independent Reviewing Officers to engage with colleagues to resolve issues in a timely manner informally wherever possible. Where the colleague does not respond, is not timely in their response or where resolution cannot be reached the issue will be escalated through a six stage process. The aim is for issues to be resolved at the earliest opportunity but always within 20 working days as per Statutory Independent Reviewing Officer handbook guidance.

**Stage 1** Informal Escalation' which is sent to Team Managers by Independent Reviewing Officers,

**Stage 2** Formal Escalation and is sent by the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Manager to the Locality Manager,

**Stage 3** Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Manager to the Head of Service,

**Stage 4** Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding to the Strategic Lead for Social Work

**Stage 5** Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding to the Strategic Director of Children's Services

**Stage 6** Referral to CAF/CASS. (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service)

This Dispute Resolution process is completed on the Children's Information System and escalations during 2015/2016 were tracked outside of the system pending development for inclusion in the Children's Information System.

The plan is to further develop the Children's Information System so escalation made to the virtual school or partner agencies can be captured more robustly going forward. This will allow the service to drive development and improvement and share thematic issues to partner leads.

Monthly reports including data and themes are provided to the Head of Service. Emerging themes are fed back to the Children's Management Team Children's Services Improvement Board, Performance Clinic on a monthly basis and Corporate Parenting Panel.

The chart below offers a high level summary of issues escalated within the dispute resolution protocol in the period April 2015 - March 2016. It collates common issues such as "no casework activity" which includes absence of recorded actions, failure to implement previous review recommendations or actual absence of case work. Escalations often included more than one issue and for a sibling group generated a multiple count of the issue

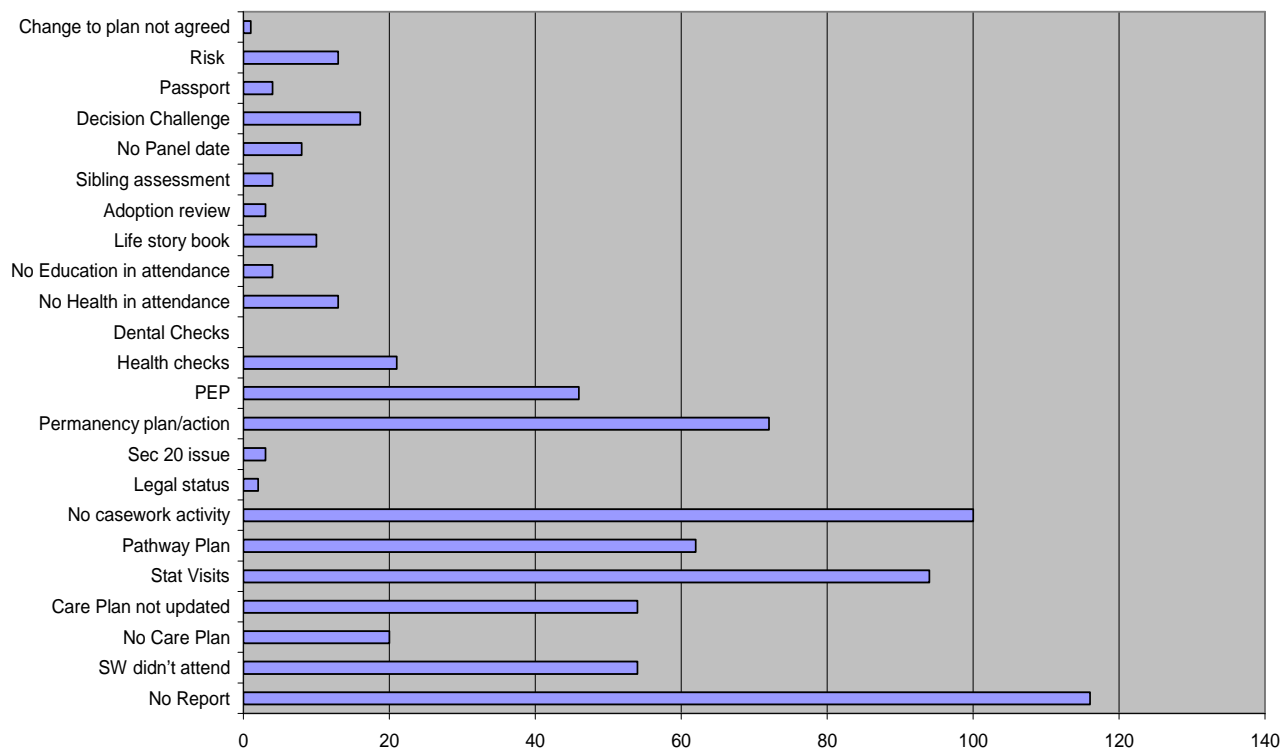
There were 564 escalations (escalations are per child) with approximately 720 individual issues raised during 2015/2016. On a very crude numerical analysis taking the approximate number of children looked after at 1236 and the total of escalations 564 would give an indicative figure of 46% had an escalation which whilst high is reflective of the improvement journey Manchester is on.

Top ranking escalation issues that are explored more fully in the next section of this report were:

- **No social work report for the looked after child review**
- **No evidence of case work activity**
- **Statutory visits out of timescale**
- **Drift in Permanency Planning**
- **Pathway Way Planning not in place.**
- **Care Plan not updated**
- **Social Worker did not attend the review**

The table below illustrates escalations made using the Dispute Resolutions protocol by issues:

**Escalations Issues**



With the revised and senior management supported Dispute Resolution, along with the improvement journey of Manchester's children's services, the service anticipates seeing a reduction in the number of escalations and shift of theme from practice standards such as attending and reports issues, to a sharper focus on care planning, the quality of practice, plans and arrangements. Also, child's wishes not being considered/ evident and challenges on decisions that may not be best meeting the child's needs and the most common challenge of preventing drift.

## 8. ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITY OF PRACTICE AND SERVICES TO LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Practice and services to Looked After Children has improved over the last 12 months. Much of this has been prompted by a more new children's services management team and an emerging more focussed Independent Reviewing Officer Service that is scrutinising practice, plans and arrangements and influencing continuous development and improvement in services.

### Key practice areas:

#### 8.1 Permanence Plans

At the 2015/2016 year end In March 2016, the percentage of children with a 2<sup>nd</sup> LAC review (4 month review) where the Permanence Plan was agreed was 59.6% (1249 out of 2095). This area requires improvement and the Independent Reviewing Officer to provide increased scrutiny in this area of practice.

As achieving permanency at the earliest opportunity through good assessment and planning is vital.

*Permanence is defined in the statutory guidance that accompanies the Children Act 1989 as providing children with:*

*'A sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity ... a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond'*

*Continuing high-quality relationships are important for children in care because they:*

- *help children build security through developing secure attachments*
- *support their ability to form relationships in the future as adults*
- *help them develop a strong sense of belonging and identity.*

***(The Care Inquiry, 2013)***

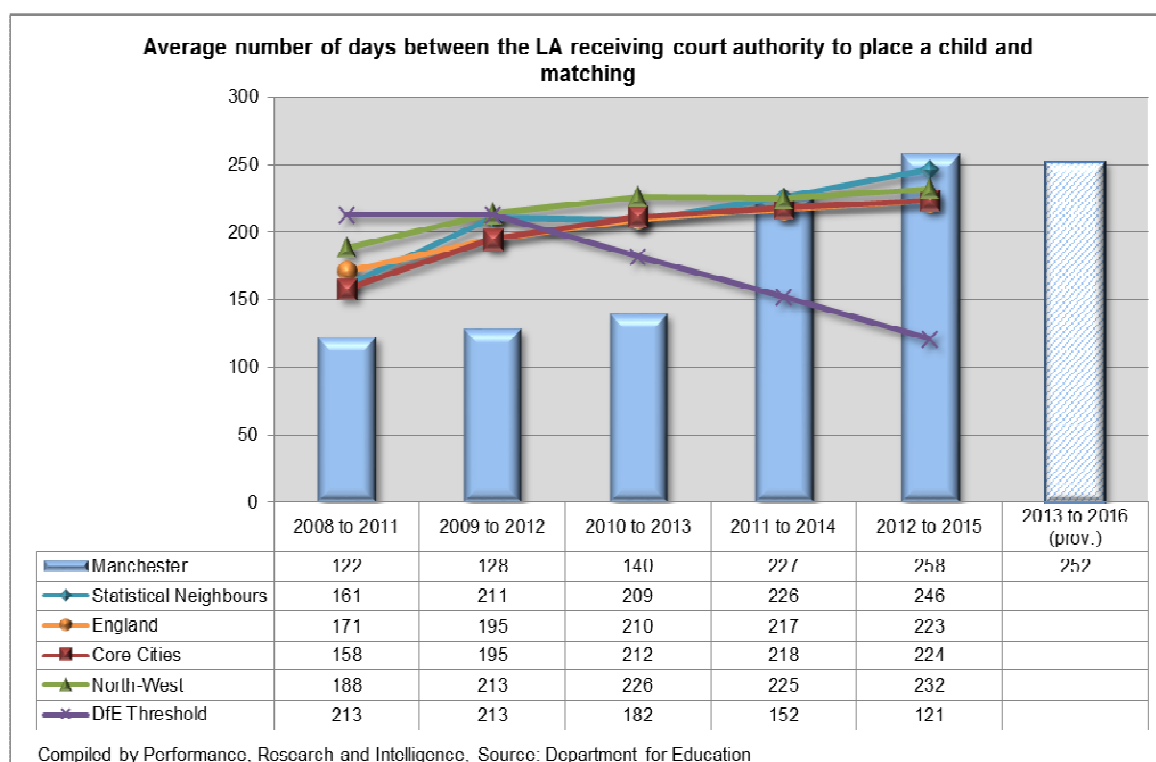
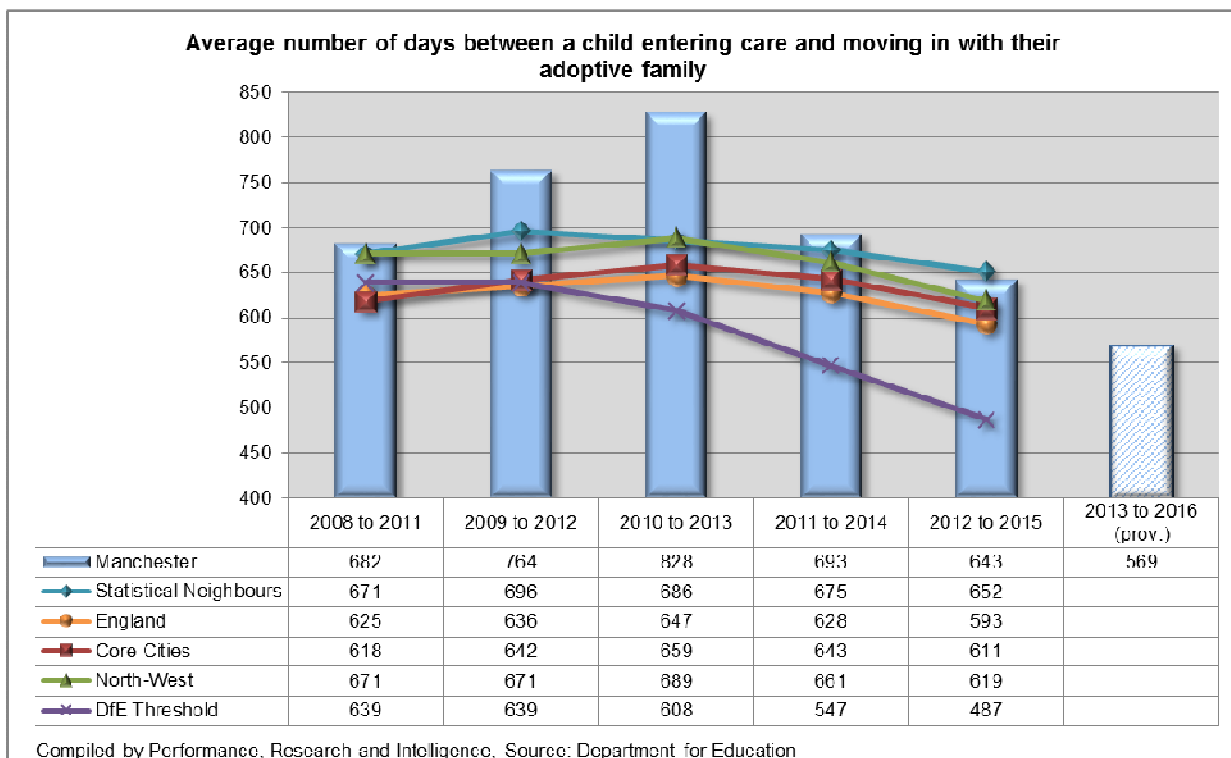
*'The best possible care involves giving children security, stability and love through their childhood and beyond.'*

***(Department for Education, 2011a, p6)***

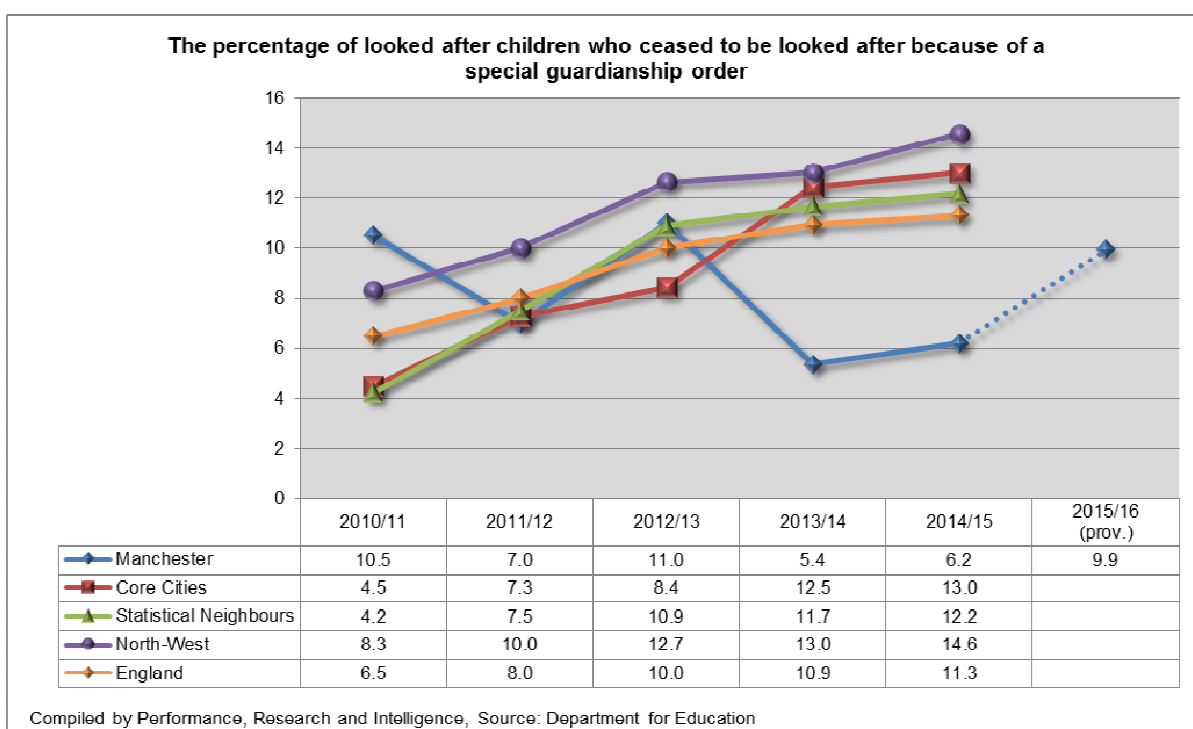
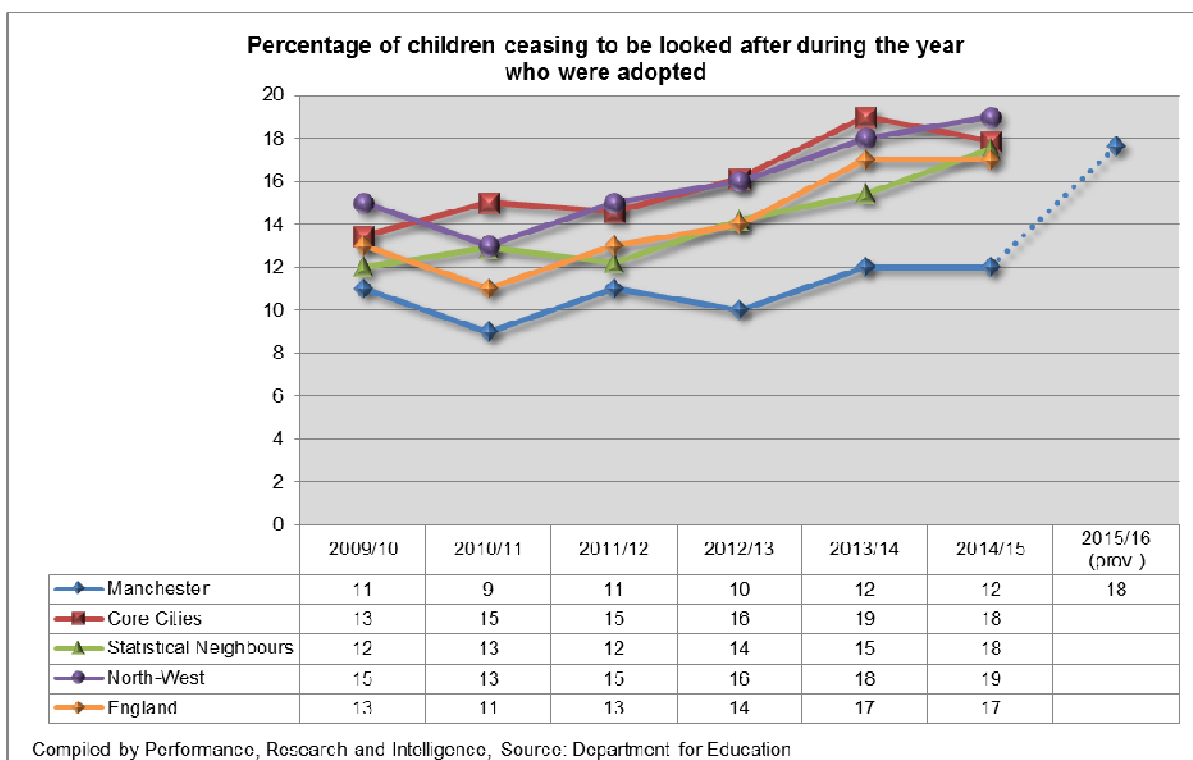
From recent research reviewed for the Care Inquiry 2013, we learn some key principles and action that we aspire to deliver to improve the outcomes for our Looked After Children:

### 8.2 Adoption Performance 2015/2016

There has been significant improvement in the timeliness of adoption during 2015/2016, which has had a positive impact on the three year averages measured by the Department for Education in the Adoption Scorecards.



In addition, there have been improvements in the percentages of children leaving care who were either adopted or subject to Special Guardianship Orders.



### 8.3 Timeliness of Special Guardianship Order (SGO)

Independent Reviewing Officers have highlighted delay in relation to SGO Assessments being completed in 14 of the formally escalated cases. Undertaking SGO Assessments in a timely manner is important to children because delays in assessments being completed results in a delay in permanence being achieved for children, and all the benefits we know that brings.

### 8.4 Section 20

There were very few Dispute Resolutions raised in relation to the use of Section 20 during 2015/2016. At the end of the 2015/2016 reporting year 13.59% (168) of the looked after child population were subject to Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. Use of Section 20 is only intended to be short term. Escalations have highlighted that in some cases Section 20 arrangements have continued for too long when assessments had concluded that it is no longer in the child's interest to return home.

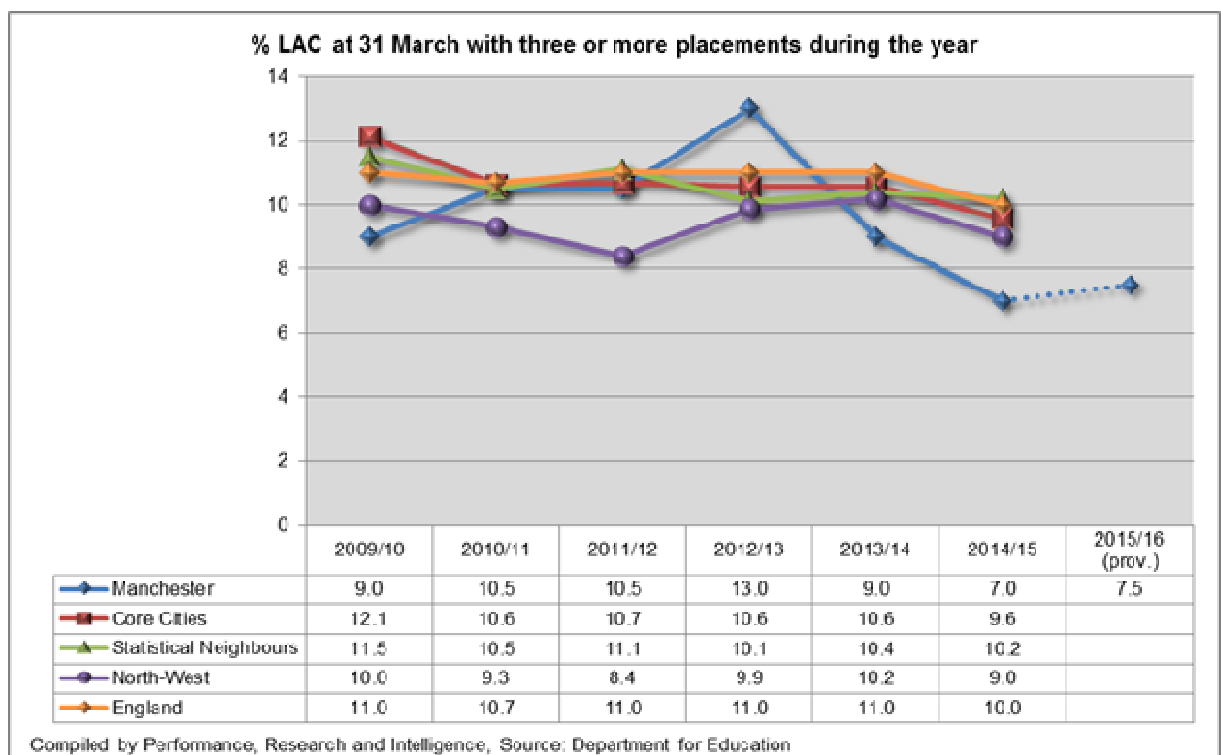
### 8.5 Placement with Parents

There were very few Dispute Resolutions raised in relation to children who were placed with parents during 2015/2016. At the end of 2015/2016 reporting year Manchester had 10% (121) children subject to Care Orders placed at home.

This raises concerns as it questions if the rehabilitation is safe, if a robust risk and needs assessment and plan are in place there should not be the need for an order, if this is not the case the placement may not be appropriate. A Care Order discharge team has been created in Manchester and Independent Reviewing Officers work closely with this team to monitoring and track progress cases where Care Orders need to be discharged. Independent Reviewing Officers will need to be more robust in their challenge when agreeing a return home the need for the order or the safety of the rehabilitation. Recent research from Bristol University indicates 48% of return home placements breakdown, it identified poor assessment, risk management and planning were the main contributions to failed reunification.

### 8.6 Placement Stability

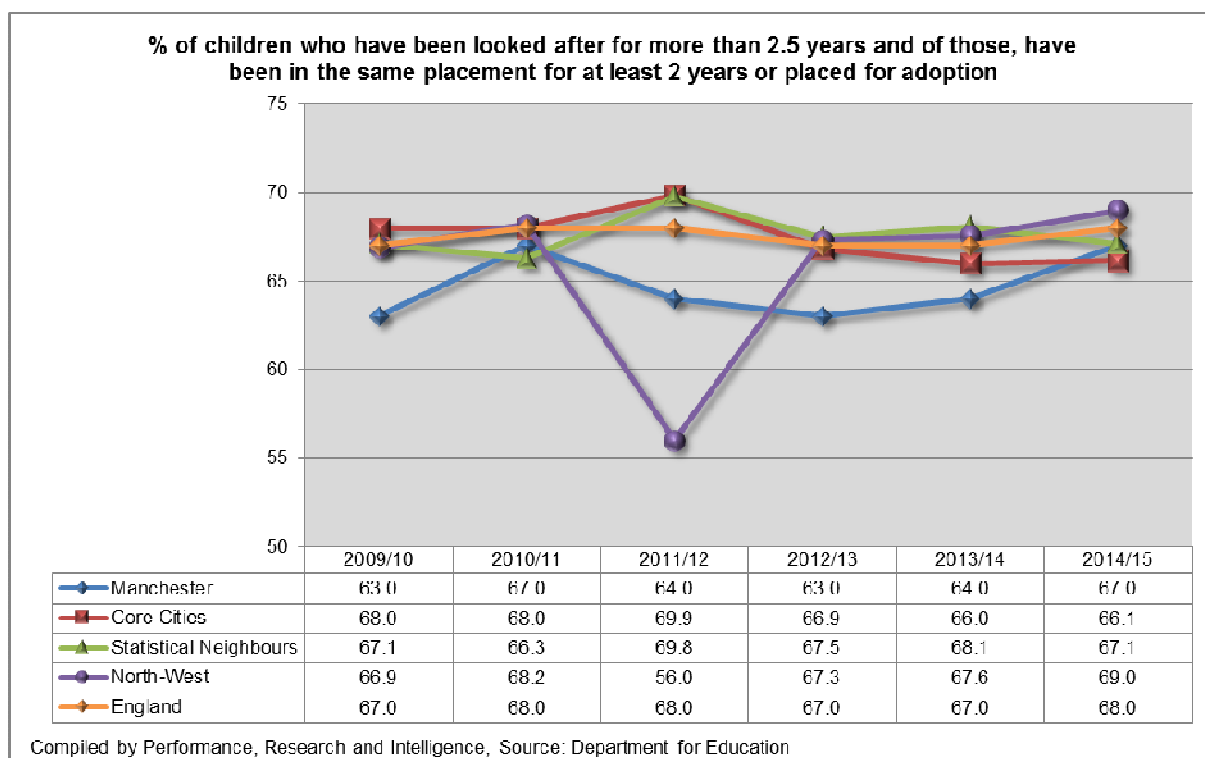
During 2015/2016 placement stability has been good but there are a small number of significant exceptions to this.





At the end of 2015/2016 the percentage of children with 3 or more placements during the year was 7.5%. This is particularly good performance when compared to the Statistical neighbour, North West, Core City and England Averages.

At the end of 2015/2016 the percentage of children under 16 years and looked after for at least 2.5yrs, in the same placement for 2 years or placed for adoption was 70.4% (387 out of 556). This again is particularly good performance when compared to the 2014/2015 year end data of our Statistical neighbour 67.0%, North West 69.0%, Core City 66.0% and the England Average 68.0%. 2015/2016 year end data for comparators will be considered when it is available towards the end of 2016.



Change is often traumatic for anyone, this is especially true for our looked after children given the quality of their care and relationships were probably compromised and led for the need for them to come into care. The potential attachment disruptions and conflict of loyalty to carers are also extremely unsettling; this should not be compounded by unnecessary and frequent changes of placement. Placement stability is critical for the emotional wellbeing of our Looked After children, enabling them to build relationships and to invest in their future by engaging in their education and local community groups.

### 8.7 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

At the 2015/2016 year end in March 2016 the percentage of looked after children who were Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking was 26, 2.1% of the looked after children population. At the start of 2016 we have seen a sharp increase of 9, 2.8%. Our rate is higher than our Statistical Neighbour at 1.7%, North West Average at 0.4%, Core City Average at 1.3% but lower than the England Average at 3.8%.

Practice needs to improve in relation to the timeliness of Age Assessments; Independent Reviewing Officers have escalated 12 cases linked to this and also the availability of Appropriate Adults. Children's Social Care have responded positively to this by providing clear advice and guidance to social workers, increasing the number of experienced social workers trained to undertake Age Assessments and Child Action North West have been commissioned to offer Appropriate Adult support.

Further work is required to consider suitable placement options for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children pending an age assessment being completed.

Timely age assessments are important for children; unaccompanied asylum seeking children have increased vulnerabilities and an age decision needs to be made at the earliest opportunity. Asylum seeking applicants who claim to be children do not always have definitive documentary evidence to support their claimed age, a decision on their age therefore needs to be made. Many are clearly children whilst some are very clearly adults. In other cases the position is more doubtful and a careful assessment of the applicant's age is required.

### **8.8 Participation and Engagement of Children and Young People**

There is a need to improve the engagement and participation of children and young people in all areas of practice including the statutory review process. At the year end in March 2016 33.4% of children had participated in their review but at one point this in the reporting year this had been as low as 26.0%

### **8.9 Pathway Plans**

Too many young people did not have a good quality pathway plan in place between 16 years 3 months and 18 years at their Looked After Child review. Over 50 dispute resolutions were made in relation to this area of practice alone which has prompted a focus on practice development and improvement.

A Pathway Plan is important to a young person as it details the services and support needed by young people aged 16 3 months to 21 years. The Pathway Plan is pivotal to the process whereby young people map out their future, articulate their aspirations and identifying interim goals along the way to realising their ambitions.

### **8.10 Participation of parents in the LAC review process**

Practice requires improvement in this area at the 2015/2016 year end in March 2016 only 31.1% of parents attended their child's review. Whilst it can be expected that some parents will not engage in the review, performance is low. The data collected does not allow us to understand whether there is a difference between mothers and fathers attendance at the review.

Enabling parents to engage in review processes wherever appropriate is important to children because the parent(s) can share an understanding of the child's journey and demonstrate a level of commitment and loyalty to their child even if at this moment in time they are unable to care for them. It is obviously vital if there is any consideration of reuniting them with their child in the future.

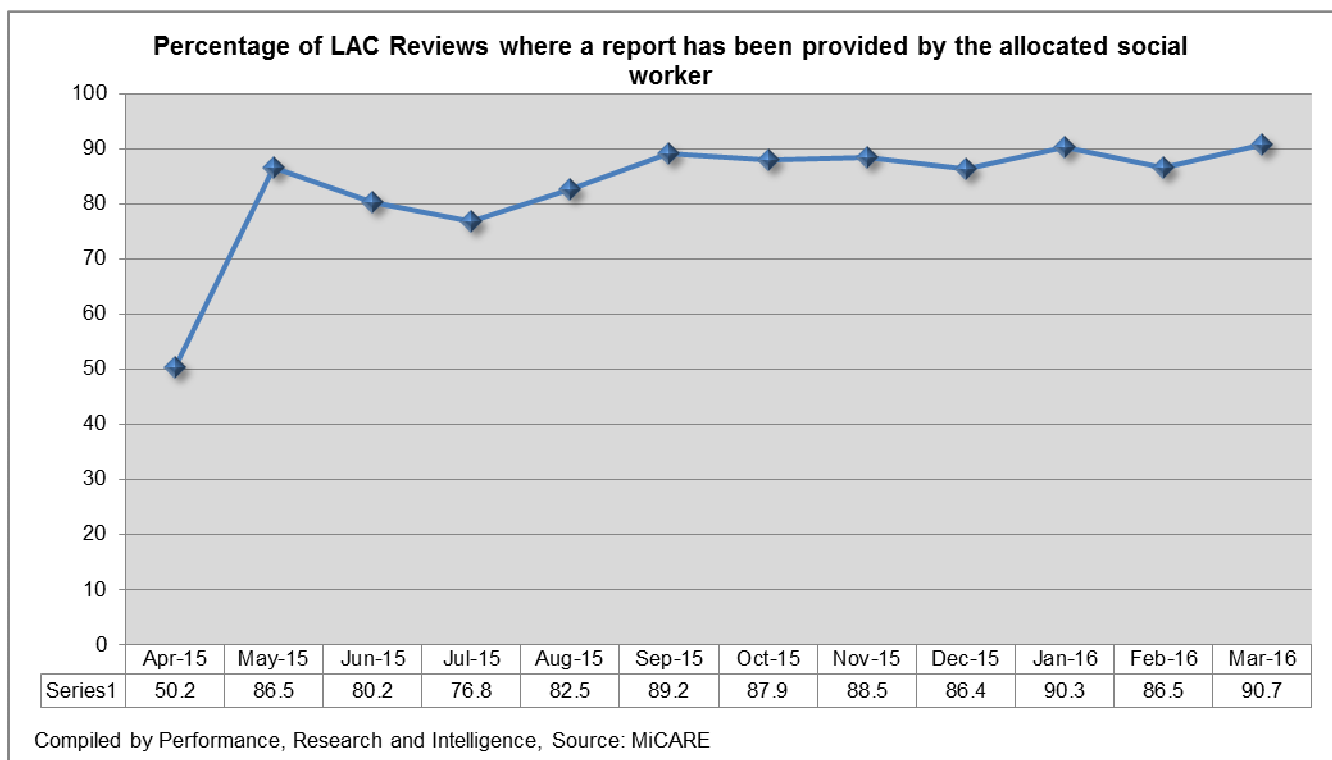
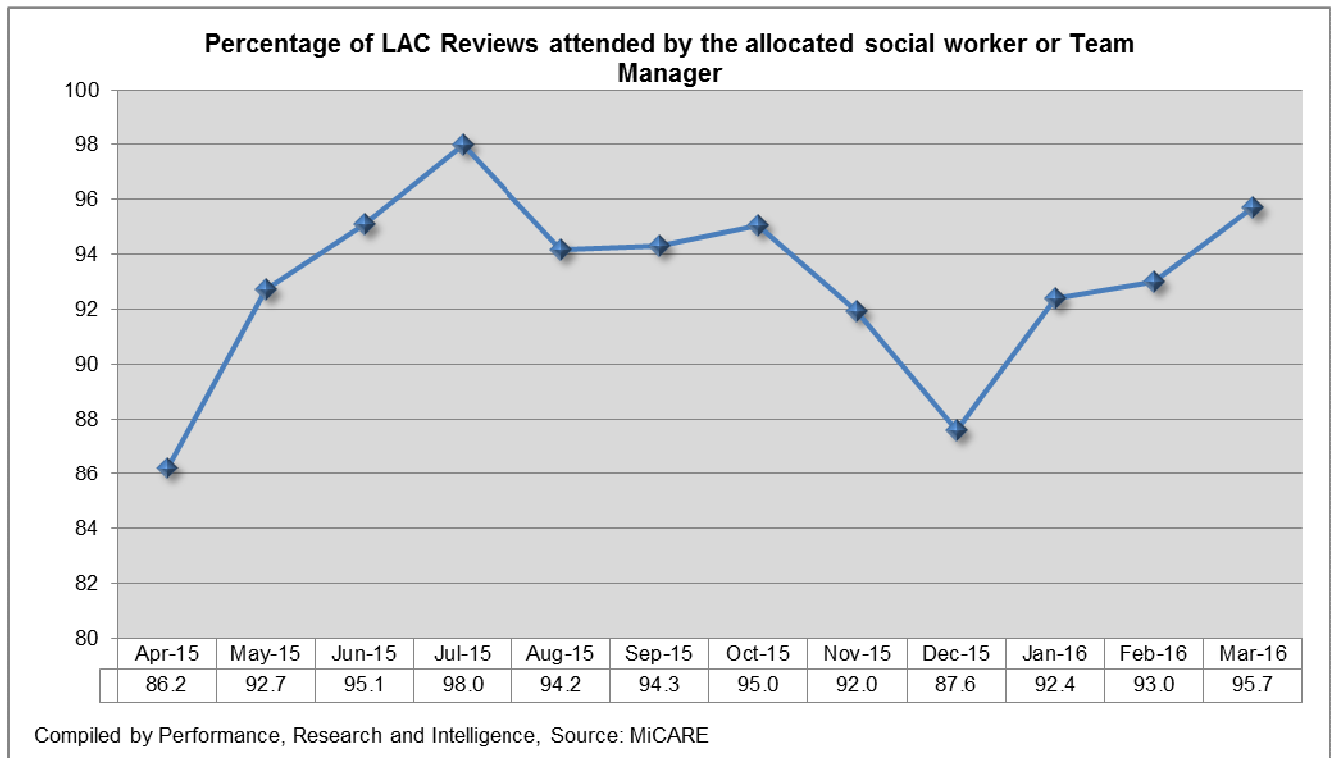
### **8.11 Looked After Child Review**

Looked After Child Reviews were held within timescales in 98.7% of cases in 2015/2016. We have also observed an improvement in the attendance of the allocated social worker and social work reports to the review as shown in the charts below. This performance is good and will need to be sustained.

### **8.12 Social Worker Attendance and Report to LAC reviews**

The charts below demonstrate a positive improvement in practice in relation to the allocated attending and providing reports to LAC reviews and further improvement is apparent since the introduction of the new dispute resolution process. This improvement needs to be sustained during 2016/2017.

The charts below illustrate the improvement in practice.



## 9. INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2015/16

- Revised Dispute Resolution Protocol was implemented in November 2015 that is compliant with IRO Handbook is beginning to embed and influence practice and service development and improvement.
- There is a better understanding within the Directorate of the role of the Independent Reviewing Officers in terms of quality assuring practice, plans and arrangements for children and young people. This has in part been brought about due to the proactive use of the new Dispute Resolution process.
- There is now increasing evidence on the child's case records of the Independent Reviewing Officer footprint via Independent Reviewing Officer Case Overviews and escalations.
- A time limited 0 - 5 Project ran from June 2014 to March 2016. The project consisted of two Independent Reviewing Officers who monitored and scrutinised the care planning process for children under the age of 5 ensuring that permanency was speedily achieved for children in this cohort and LAC Review meetings were held every three monthly.
- The reduced case load due to increased establishment and the gradual safe reduction in the numbers of looked after children population has enabled the re-establishing of the full IRO tasks which in turn has seen more timely intervention by IRO's when needed.
- Quality Assurance and Performance Improvement frameworks are now in place and are driving continuous development and improvement in practice and /performance clinics.
- Independent Reviewing Officers are now offering improved oversight and quality assurance.
- More children are now seen by Independent Reviewing Officers' prior to review meetings, whilst further improvement is required the child voice, wishes and feelings are more evident in the review process than before.
- Social worker attendance and reports to Looked After Children Reviews is much improved.
- Recommendations and minutes of Looked After Child reviews are distributed and added to the child's case file within the required timescales.
- A refreshed internal process and agreement with Wigan Borough Council ensuring Independent Reviewing Officers have direct access to independent legal advice when needed. In 2014/2015 when Wigan Borough Council received only one request for independent legal advice since November 2015 10 requests were made. This demonstrates that there has been an increased focus on plans for looked after children.
- Independent Visiting and Advocacy services delivered by Coram Voice have been actively promoted by Independent Reviewing Officers.
- Refresh and development of a more robust Quality Assurance Framework that includes a Voice of Children and Young People Framework.
- Refresh and development of Practice standards

## 10. KEY PRIORITY DEVELOPMENT AREAS FOR 2016/2017

- **Evidence of Impact to improve outcomes for Looked After Children and Young People**

The Independent Reviewing Officer service will more robustly evidence positive outcomes for children and young people as a result of oversight of practice, plans and arrangements and use of the Dispute Resolution Protocol.

- **Dispute Resolution Protocol used to drive improvement in practice, plans and arrangements.**

Independent Reviewing Officers will consistently use the Dispute Resolution Protocol to raise challenge when there are concerns about practice, plans and arrangements for Looked After Children. Issues will be escalated and Independent Reviewing Officers will be supported to challenge improvements in practice. This will be used more consistently with partner agencies charged with providing essential services to Looked After Children.

- **Permanence Plans are achieved at the earliest opportunity.**

Independent Reviewing Officer will provide increased scrutiny in this area of practice to ensure permanence plans are achieved at the earliest opportunity through good quality timely assessment and care planning.

- **Section 20**

Independent Reviewing Officers will provide increased scrutiny of use of Section 20, Children Act 1989. This will ensure arrangements are appropriate and do not continue for too long when assessments had concluded that it is no longer in the child's interest to return home.

- **Placement with Parents**

Independent Reviewing Officers will need to be more robust in their scrutiny and challenge in these cases.

- **Pathway Plans are of a good quality and consistently in place.**

Independent Reviewing Officers will ensure robust Pathway Plans are in place for young people by the age of 16yrs 3 months that map out their future, articulate their aspirations and identifying interim goals along the way to realising their ambitions.

- **Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children**

Independent Reviewing Officers will continue to offer scrutiny and challenge in order to ensure age assessments and decisions are made at the earliest opportunity.

Independent Reviewing Officers will proactively promote Independent Visiting to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children to increase take up

- **Participation and Engagement of Children and Young People**

Independent Reviewing Officers will encourage and promote the importance of engagement and participation of children and young people in all areas of practice including the statutory review process.

Independent Reviewing Officers will explore new and innovative ways of engaging children and young people in their reviews ensuring their views, opinions and wishes are consistently heard and taken into account.

Independent Reviewing Officer will achieve a target of:

60% of children and young people engaged and participating in their review.

45% of children over 11yrs co-chair their review.

85% of children and young people will be visited by their Independent Reviewing Officer in the 6 weeks prior to their Review. Minutes of reviews will be consistently written in an 'easy read' child and young person friendly way.

- **Feedback from children, young People, parents and carers drives continuous development and improvement in practice.**

We will ensure feedback is consistently used to inform development and improvement practice and services to Looked after Children and care leavers. This will also need to include learning from complaints, advocacy interventions and the Quality Assurance Framework.

- **Participation of parents in the LAC review process is actively promoted where ever appropriate.**

Independent Reviewing Officers will proactively enable parents to engage in review processes wherever appropriate in order that parent(s) can share an understanding of the child's journey and demonstrate a level of commitment and loyalty to their child even if at this moment in time they are unable to care for them.

By July 2016 advocates will be made available to those parents who may need additional assistance to communicate their views and opinions at Looked after Child reviews.

- **Training and development and development plans**

Training and development plans will reflect the Training Needs Analysis undertaken by Human Resources Organisational Development team and will support the development and improvement in Independent Reviewing Officer practice and services to looked after children.

- **Advanced Practice for Independent Reviewing Officers, HEA4173**

From September 2016 Manchester Independent Reviewing Officers will have access to this accredited course that will be delivered by Edgehill University. This course focuses on the strategic importance of the statutory Independent Reviewing Officer role within local authority services to looked after children and young people and the knowledge, skills and values required by the Independent Reviewing Officer to assess and monitor care planning and challenge local authority provision and/or practice where appropriate.

The module aims to refocus Independent Reviewing Officers on the core capabilities that support effective practice in the role and offers an informed, efficient and quality assured route to attaining and developing these capabilities, thereby supporting better practice in social care and better outcomes for people who use social care services and the local authorities and other agencies that provide them. It also provides a useful, relevant and certificated opportunity to practitioners to demonstrate compliance with continuing professional development requirements of the relevant professional register.

Funding has been secured for all Manchester Independent Reviewing Officers to undertake this course during 2016/2017.

- **Re launch of Total Respect training**

Total Respect is a national award winning training delivered by care experienced trainers. It supports the full implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This training will offer participants a thorough understanding of children's rights, including the right to participation, and relevance to the delivery of child centred services; explore assumptions about children and young people, listening to young people, and the experience of being a child in care; learn about involving young people within care planning, young people's involvement in policy development and effective advocacy.

- **Signs of Safety**  
During 2016/2017 we will adopt Signs of Safety as the basis of work with children and families across Manchester. This will ensure that a proven, evidence-based practice framework is used across all services creating consistent and inclusive experience for children and families. Children's Services and partner agencies will use Signs of Safety as the basis of case discussions in multi-agency fora including Looked After Children's Reviews.
- **CAFCASS**  
Independent Reviewing Officer Services will need to improve how it works with CAFCASS. Independent Reviewing Officers and Children's Guardians develop productive working relationships, both during care proceedings and when seeking to resolve a dispute on behalf of children.
- **Performance Management**  
Embed the performance management culture that drives continuous development and Improvement in practice.
- **Practice Observations**  
Direct observation of practice will be facilitated leading to specific support and increased challenge for the Independent Reviewing Officers will also lead to identification of individual and service wide learning and development needs.
- **Service Development Plan 2016/2017**  
An Independent Reviewing Officer service development plan will be developed informed by this annual report.

## 11. CONCLUSION

The Independent Reviewing Officer service aspires to be outstanding. We will know we are outstanding when we can demonstrate we are placing children and young people front and centre to everything we do and consistently quality assuring practice plans and arrangements for them.

The service has made progress in relation to its improvement journey during the last 12 months and has set firm foundations on which further improvements can be built.

There is now increased stability in senior managers and there is now more consistent management and leadership of the service.

The Council has made a considerable investment in the service which has enabled the service to ensure Independent Reviewing Officers have more manageable caseloads and can execute their statutory duties to a high standard.

The culture and conditions are now in place that will enable the service to move forward and achieve its aspiration to be a fully effective Independent Reviewing Officer service that is driving continuous development and improvement in practice and services for looked after children.

There is now an improved understanding of the statutory role and responsibilities of the Independent Reviewing Officer service across Children's Services and partner agencies.

The Independent Reviewing Officer service is clear insight and understanding of its strengths and development needs. There is beginning to be evidence that the service is having a positive impact and contributing to improving the experience and outcomes for our looked after children.

There is now a Dispute Resolution Protocol in place. We will embed this and ensure the learning from practice is taken so the same issues do not keep repeating themselves within the system.

Whilst there is an emerging positive picture there is still much to be done to reach our aspiration to be an outstanding Independent Reviewing Officer service, which is what our Looked After Children deserve.

Service plans will drive continuous development and improvement in Independent Reviewing Officer practice, performance and services.



## 12. REFERENCES

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## APPENDICES

1. 'Our Promise', Pledge to Children and Young People May 2016

### **Our promise**

**As your Corporate Parents we promise to respect you as an individual and support YOU on your journey to be a resilient and confident person in your own right.**

#### **Respect YOU**

- We will make sure we support you in a kind, compassionate, honest, considerate and timely way
- We will LISTEN to you and VALUE your voice, as an individual and through our Children in Care and Care Leavers Council
- We will involve YOU in decisions and plans about your life
- We will make you feel comfortable and supported to attend your meetings and reviews if you wish to
- We will try to help YOU to understand why you are in our Care
- We will talk to you in a language or use methods that you understand

#### **Care for YOU**

- We will make sure we provide a stable environment for YOU to live and learn in
- We will do everything to make sure your happiness, well-being and safety is our priority
- We will support YOU to stay healthy and make sure YOU get good health care when you need it (including your physical, mental and sexual health)
- We will make sure you get good, nutritious meals and help you to make healthy choices
- We will make sure you live with people who care about and support YOU
- We will wherever possible help YOU keep in contact with the people that matter to YOU
- We will provide you with accurate information and advice and help YOU to access services that can help you
- We will make sure YOU know your rights and who to turn to if you are unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint

#### **Support YOU**

- We will make sure people champion your rights in your school or education setting and understand the issues that YOU may face
- We will try to avoid unnecessary placement and or school changes
- We will help YOU to find hobbies and interests to develop new skills and friendships
- We will support YOU in any pathways YOU choose beyond School or College including going to university or into an apprenticeship
- We will encourage YOU to be the best you can be and achieve the goals and dreams YOU have set

#### **Help YOU Grow**

- We will help and support YOU to become independent and take charge of your own life
- We will do everything we can to build the skills and confidence to help YOU make a smooth transition into adult life

- We will support YOU to become responsible for your own actions and to participate as an active citizen
- We will make sure when you leave our care that you live somewhere you feel safe and happy in
- We will support you even if things go wrong, and will continue to challenge you and celebrate your achievements