

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2020-2021



Report to: Children's Leadership Team

This report will also be published on the Manchester City Council external website.

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Completed: October 2021

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FOREWORD

The Annual Report provides an account of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. It evaluates the effectiveness and impact of the IRO Service in the planning and outcomes for Our Children and Young People (previously referred to as Looked After Children) and ensuring that Manchester Local Authority as a Corporate Parent is discharging its statutory responsibilities towards them and remains ambitious in what we achieve with Our Children in Manchester.

IROs have a pivotal role to play in ensuring that care plans for children effectively address their needs, consider Our Children and Young People's ascertainable views and opinions and improve outcomes for them. During the period relevant to this report, we entered a global pandemic that forced the service to work differently and enabled us to find different ways to connect with children and young people. The report demonstrates the continuous development of the IRO Service over the last year and its role in the continuous journey of practice development in Manchester.

1.SERVICE AND LEGAL CONTEXT

1.1 The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

The role of the IRO is set within a legal context and the framework of the IRO Handbook 2010. The appointment by local authorities of an IRO is a statutory requirement. The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plans for Our Children and Young People fully reflect their needs, ensures that their wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the Local Authority's statutory responsibilities.

The statutory duties of the IRO are set out in Section 25B (1) of the Children Act 1989 which are to:

- Monitor the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to the child's case.
- Participate in any review of the child's case.
- Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority.
- Perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

The IRO Handbook clearly sets out the statutory roles and duties as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of Local Authorities in establishing an effective IRO Service. There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of an IRO outlined in the handbook, which are (i) to chair the child's review meeting and (ii) monitoring the child's progress on an ongoing basis.

1.2 Profile of the IRO Service in Manchester

The IRO Service in Manchester sits within the Safeguarding and Improvement Unit. The service 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 the practice, plans, arrangements and impact for Our Children by the Local Authority. The Strategic Lead for Safeguarding and Practice Improvement reports directly to the Director of Children's Services.

Management capacity in the IRO service consists of the Strategic Lead for Safeguarding and Practice Improvement, the Service Lead for Children's Safeguarding and two Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Managers. In the last year, due to the increase in staffing linked to the number of Our Children in Manchester and our ambition to offer children in Manchester the best quality of service, we have reallocated capacity across the whole of the service,

with one of the two Child Protection Safeguarding Conference Managers continuing with the supervision of IROs who support our Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC).

In 2020/2021 there were 21.5 full time equivalent IROs posts in Manchester occupied by 24 staff (4.5 job-sharers). While the service had a reasonably stable workforce in 2020/2021, we reallocated internal capacity to increase IRO provision by 1.5 posts. This resource came within the current staffing establishment across the service and was able to be achieved as the numbers of Children on Child Protection Plans reduced during the year. We had 2 staff leave to take up posts in another Local Authority and CAFCASS. One post was filled by an experienced IRO returning from a career break and the other was filled by an experienced Social Worker from within Manchester Children's Services. A further IRO reduced their hours as part of a flexible retirement agreement. This degree of limited movement of staff within the team is within expected levels and has not caused significant disruption to the relationships with children.

The Service employs a mix of male (4) and female (20) staff from a range of cultural backgrounds. In terms of the cultural/ethnic make-up of the staff group, 66.5% are White British/European, 21% Black African or Caribbean and 12.5% are from an Asian background. This reflects the culture and ethnicity of most of the children we work with. The staff cohort is made up of qualified social workers with many years of experience as IROs, Children's Guardians, Social Workers and Team Managers.

The impact of this is that for most children in Manchester, they have lasting and stable relationships with their IRO who will have been alongside them in their experience of care. Our children will experience the diversity of their inheritance reflected in the people who are planning with them and who can act as role models and support their ambitions.

1.3 Service response to Covid 19.

In March 2020 the Government Announced a lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Manchester Safeguarding Improvement Unit developed a Covid-19 Service Delivery Practice Guidance, which was regularly reviewed in line with government advice. The guidance recommended that all IRO activity was carried out virtually.

We continued to visit children virtually and chair Review Meetings for children & young people. We ensured these meetings continued to be held within timescale. Children, young people, families and partners joined meetings online and while this ensure that children continued to have timely reviews and participation and engagement remained a strength, in hindsight the offer to children would have been stronger if face-to-face visits and meetings could have continued. The impact of this is discussed throughout the report.

1.4 IRO Capacity

In 2020/2021 IROs in Manchester chaired 3,811 reviews, which is a very slight decrease from 2019/2020 when they chaired 3,835. Service resourcing throughout the year has

aimed to ensure that there was an adequate number of IROs in post enabling the service to ensure that IRO have the capacity to deliver effective reviews for Our Children. We have worked hard to maintain caseloads within the range of 50 - 70 children as recommended in the IRO Handbook. We are committed to caseload levels remaining under 70 per IRO to provide the capacity to carry out the duties and functions to a high standard, including sufficient oversight and challenge. This has had a positive impact on the service with the average caseload at the end of March 2021 being 65, which is a significant decrease from 2019/2020 when the average caseload was 71. This also allows us to have clear and ambitious expectations of staff for delivering a quality service for children and young people.

1.5 IRO Learning and Development

We have continued this year to ensure that IROs in Manchester are equipped with the right knowledge and skills that enable them to scrutinise practice, plans and arrangements for Our Children and Young People effectively. Manchester have been committed to providing a good virtual platform to enable virtual learning and development environments using Google Meet & Microsoft Teams from October 2020.

IROs continued to receive supervision monthly in 2020/2021. Supervision provided the IROs with an opportunity to reflect on planning, progress and outcomes for Our Children and the pro forma agenda reflects the Signs of Safety Framework so ensure supervision is strength based. IROs all continued to have the opportunity to plan their learning and development in their annual About You Appraisal in line with Manchester City Council policy.

IROs continue to have open access to expert advice through the provision of independent legal advice from Wigan Council and this is seen as a benefit to the IRO service. We know that generally IROs make most use of the independent advice to consider whether an escalation is required at a more senior level regarding a specific element of the Care Plan. An example of the impact of this is the use of Section 20. There have been several legal advice consultations around the appropriate use of Section 20, which led to a specific briefing at a Development Day to consider the shared understanding of the use of Section 20, patterns in practice and the effect on permanency planning for children. This led to greater consistency in understanding and applying case law, and more appropriate challenge and discussion with operational services.

In 2020/2021 we had hoped to continue to support staff to undertake the accredited IRO Advanced Practitioner course. Two of our experienced IROs nominated themselves to attend the course delivered by Edgehill University. Unfortunately, the course was postponed due to the Covid lockdown. We still have 7 IROs who have successfully completed the course and 2 more IROs due to commence the course in 2021/2022.

Given we have 7 staff who have completed this already, we continue to benefit from their learning and development in:

- Critical analysis of their role as an IRO with reference to current legislative, policy and guidance frameworks for Our Children in England.
- Critical analysis of the effective approaches to risk assessment and management.
- effective approaches to planning, delivering and evaluation of care and support for Our Children.
- Reflection and evaluation of IROs practice for Our Children to identify strengths and areas for effective professional development.

We have invested in creating learning spaces and have delivered monthly full-service sessions and 6 monthly Service Development Days throughout 2020/2021. The events took place virtually in October 2020 and in March 2021. Both events were well attended by IROs. Guest speakers have contributed to learning on subject areas such as a presentation from Legal focussing on the Child's Timeframe; the Child Obesity Strategy; the role of LADO, Dispute Resolutions and Safety Planning. The monthly full-service sessions focussed on learning from Audits and offering IROs the opportunity to discuss what is working well and what we are worried about. Staff also had the opportunity to attend the Children's Services Good Practice week sessions which took place in February 2021 and Staff Engagement Sessions led by the Senior Management Team.

1.6 Regional and local links

The IRO Managers attend quarterly meetings with the Greater Manchester Regional IRO Managers Group. This feeds into the National IRO Manager's Group and the Department of Education (DfE) which considers changes to policy and practice. The Greater Manchester IRO Managers Group shares data and good practice across the 10 Local Authorities.

The IRO management team are integral to several panels in the Social Work Service in which the IRO perspective and overview of planning is valued as part of the decision-making process and over-view of practice. These include the Discharge of Care Order Panel, Permanence Tracking Panels, Our Children missing from Care and Closing the Loop Panels linked to the Quality Assurance Framework. In 2020/2021, IROs were linked to specific Localities in Manchester to share their knowledge about good practice, to listen to Social Workers views about the review process and to build links with Social Workers and Team Managers in their allocated Locality and this continued using virtual platforms to connect.

As a result of the improved connectivity with localities and the increased participation in the quality assurance activity this has resulted in a reduction in our dispute resolutions, increased in compliance of reports being available prior to reviews and recommendations being completed in a timely manner ahead of reviews.

2.OUR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE DATA 2019/2020

2.1 Children and Young People Population - Children living in Manchester

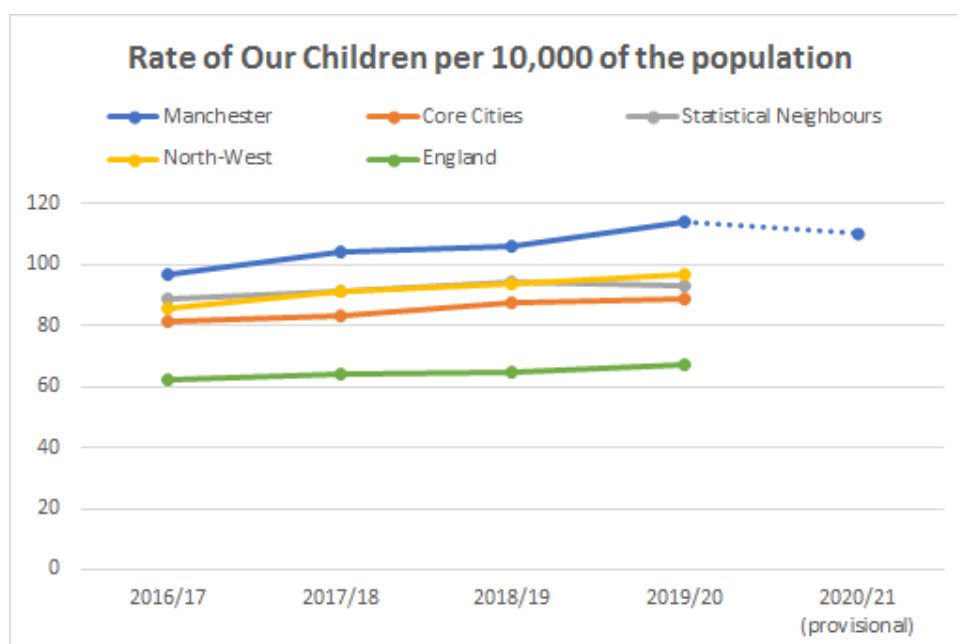
There are approximately 129,053 children and young people under the age of 18 years living in Manchester. This is 22% of the population. From this data we know;

- 33.8% of the local authority's children aged under 16 years old are living in relative low-income families (less than 60% of median income).
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals in primary schools is 39.3%. This has increased by 8 percentage points during the pandemic (the national average is 21.5%). In secondary schools it is 38.5%, an increase of 7 percentage points during the pandemic (the national average is 18.9%).
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language in primary schools is 42.4% (the national average is 21.3%) and in secondary schools is 39.3% (the national average is 17.1%).

The ONS reports that Manchester's child population has been growing over the last decade. The rate of growth overall of 2.7% seen in 2011 has been on the decline, with a little increase in 2013 and 2014 but the rate has been around 1% since 2017. This has led to around 9,500 more five- to 11-year-olds in 2019 than in 2013 (a 21.7% increase). It is expected that secondary schools will continue to see increasingly larger cohorts from 2020 through to 2030. Manchester is a city that benefits from many different cultures and backgrounds, alongside this, the issue of child poverty is a particularly significant issue in the lives of a high proportion of children and their families in Manchester.

2.2 Profile of Our Children

On 31 March 2021, 1,371 children were being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 111 per 10,000 children). The overall number has decreased from 1,407 on 31 March 2020.

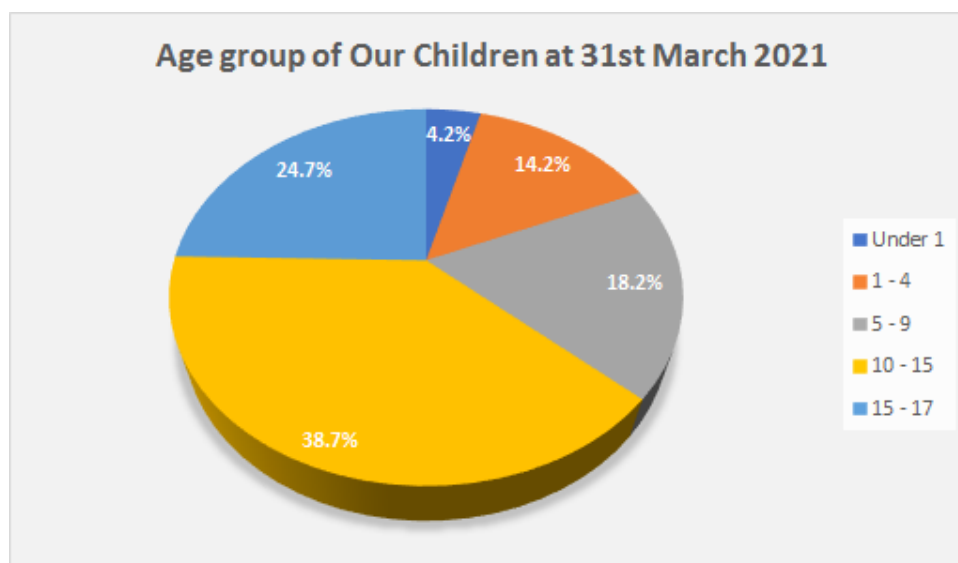


As in previous years, there are more boys (772 = 56.3%) than girls (599 = 43.7%) who are looked after in Manchester. This closely resembles the national gender split of children and young people looked after (56% / 44%).

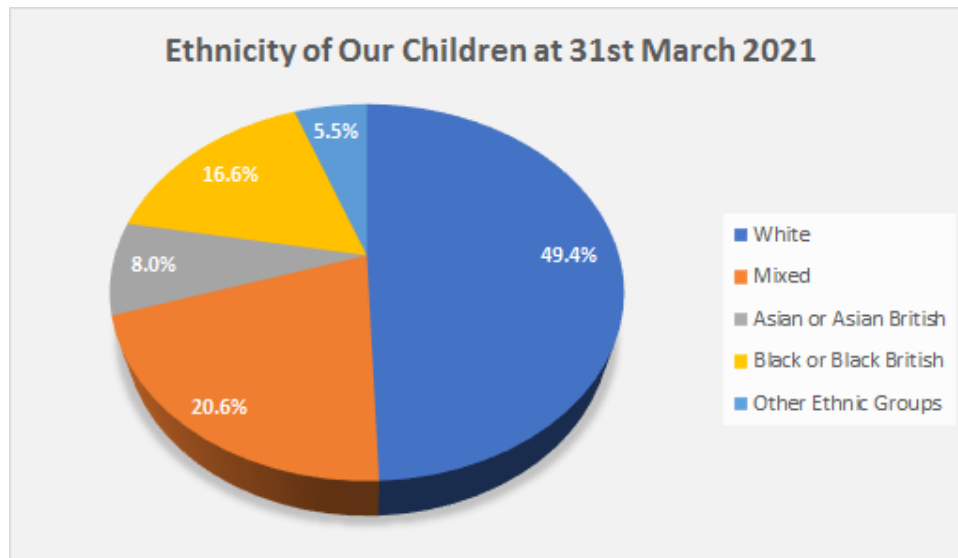
Comparing the age groups nationally, Manchester has:

- Lower under 1 percentage (4.2% v. 5%),
- Similar age 1 to 4 percentage (14%),
- Similar age 5 to 9 percentage (18%),
- Lower age 10 to 15 (38.7% v. 39%) and
- Higher age 16 to 17 (24.7% v. 24%)

Overall, the age groups of Our Children in Manchester mirror the National data.



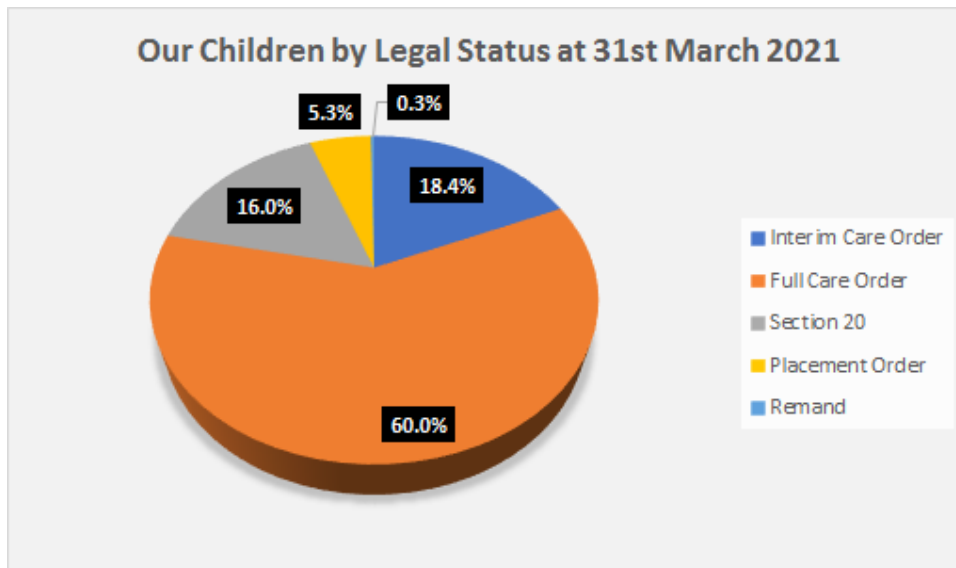
Last year saw a notable change in the number of Our Children aged 16 and 17 years which increased from 304 on 31 March 2019 to 360 on 31 March 2020. The figure this year has decreased slightly to 338 (24.7%) on 31 March 2021. The Local Authority has a strong offer for young people at the edge of care and support services provided to ensure children where safe to do so remain at home.



There has been an overall decrease in children in our care; In terms of ethnicity, there has been a further reduction in the proportion of Our Children who are White or White British (50% to 49.4%), Asian / Asian British has remained static at 8%. The proportion of those who are of dual heritage has increased from 19% to 20.6%, while Black / Black British has risen slightly from 16% to 16.6%.

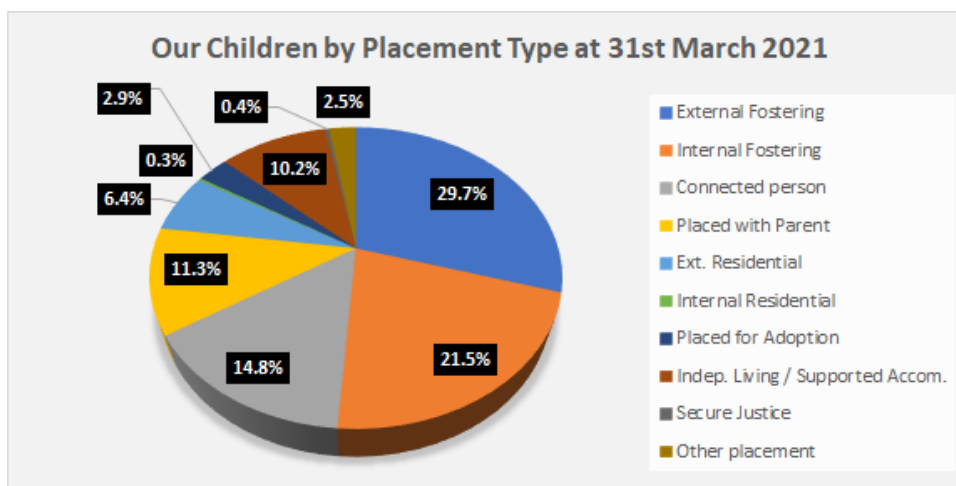
Comparing ethnicity groups nationally, Manchester has a much lower White or White British percentage (49.4% v. 74%) and much higher percentages of dual heritage (20.6 % v. 10%), Asian / Asian British (8% v. 4%) and Black / Black British (16.6% v. 7%). This reflects the ethnicity of the wider population in Manchester. It is positive that the IRO service is diverse within its staffing, which is positive for the children we work alongside. In 2020 we spent time considering Black Matters and will continue to focus on ensuring that as a service we have an enriched knowledge of the ethnic groups we work alongside.

2.3 Legal status of Our Children



The proportion of children subject to Interim Care Orders (ICO) has dropped slightly to 18.4% (previously 20.5%). At the end of March 2021, we had 252 children subject to an ICO, in March 2020 there were 289.

As you would expect, most of Our Children (60%) are subject to Care Orders. The number has decreased by 13 children in this period (2019/20: 59.3%) however the number of children subject to Care Orders has remained relatively stable over the last 12 months.



The majority of children and young people (66.3%) continue to be placed in foster care or with connected carers. This is a very slightly reduced proportion from last year when it stood at 67%. The percentage of children placed with external foster care decreased from 32% (2019/20) to 29.7% (2020/21). While the percentage of children and young people placed with connected people has remained constant around 14.8%. In terms of other placement types, there has been a slight decrease in the use of residential care from 8%

(2019/20) to 6.5% (2020/21). 695 (or 50.7%) live outside the local authority area, although 536 of those are placed within Greater Manchester.

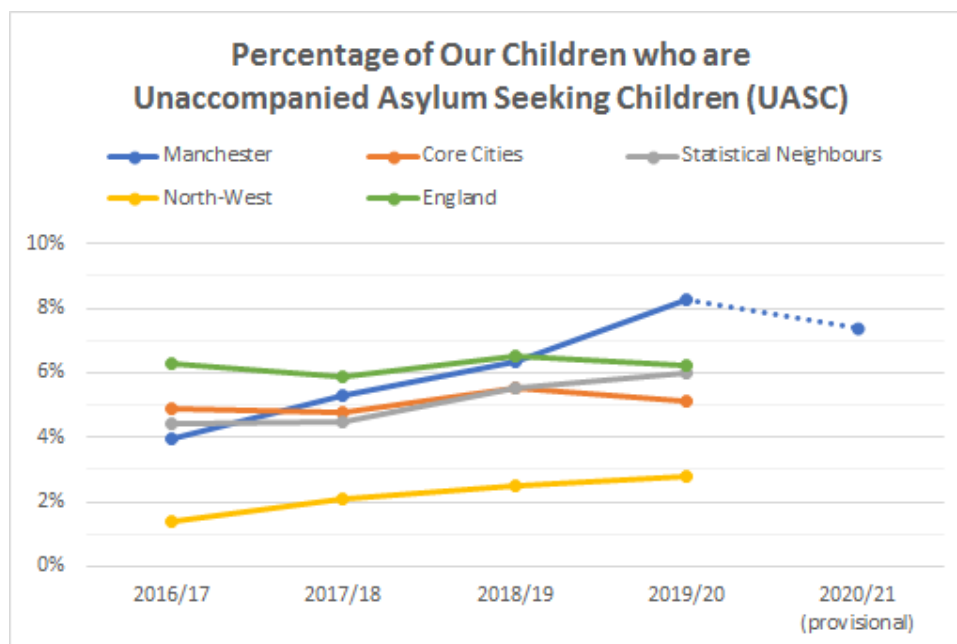
The living arrangements for Our Children reflects a shared belief that children need to stay within their communities, should be supported to live within their extended families and be able to experience the security, investment and support that family life offers. Where relevant IROs have championed arrangements for children that provide the best environment for them to thrive and achieve their potential.

2.4 Specific groups of young people (UASC)

The diagram below illustrates the slight decrease in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) since last year. The figure stands at 102 which represents 7.4% of Our Children population. The total is 11 less than at the same point last year. The proportion is higher than our Statistical Neighbours (6%), the Northwest average (3%) and the National average (6%) for 2019/20 (2020/2021 figures not yet published). The UASC numbers for this period have been impacted by the pandemic lockdowns and restrictions on travel. Fewer UASC arrived in Manchester via the airport. The majority arrive on trucks and are left on motorways or dropped in the city and find their way to police stations. Many young people do not know where they are when they arrive. Some young people arrive and are already aware of the Manchester football teams, the diversity of the city and links to local communities via word of mouth.

There are four IROs who are identified to primarily work and establish relationships with this cohort of young people and all are managed by the same Safeguarding Manager. This approach helps to ensure consistency across the city and this group of young people benefit from the knowledge and expertise of specialist workers. The group of four IROs offer each other peer supervision and meet regularly to identify shared practice issues. They can access training on UASC issues when available. The IROs are in regular contact with the specialist UASC Social Work Team which was established in July 2020.

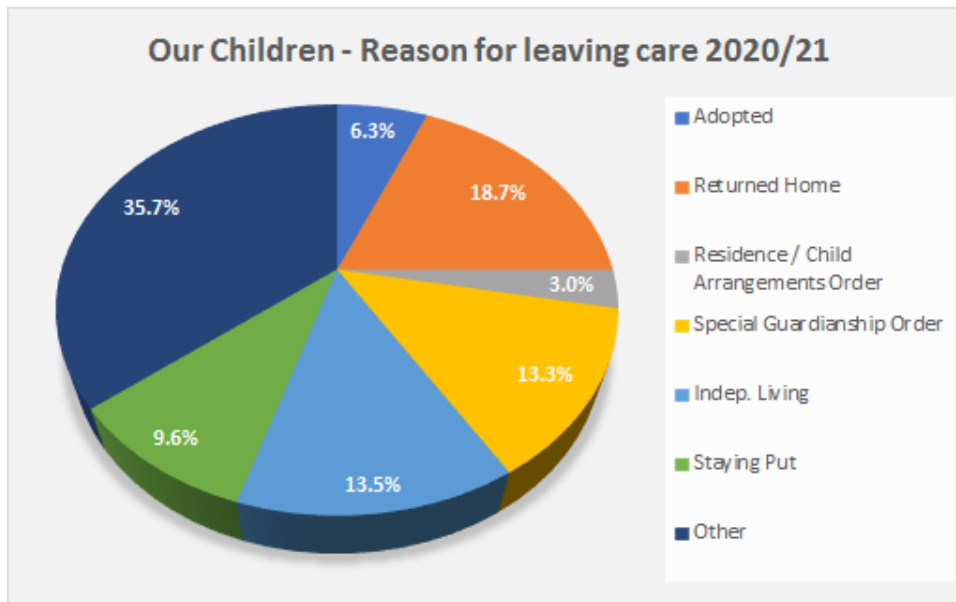
The impact of the designated IROs for UASC has demonstrated the benefits of the expert knowledge in the area, in ensuring the additional challenges they often face does not result in drift and delay for securing their plan for permanency. This is often more pressurised due to their age at the point they come into care in Manchester. The relationship with the UASC team has allowed for practice issues to be addressed both when something works well and something that needs to be improved on in a timely manner to improve outcomes for all UASC not just individual young people.



2.5 Outcomes for Children & Young People.

In 2020/21, 460 children ceased to be looked after, compared to 501 in 2019/20. The breakdown (and actual numbers) of children ceasing to be looked after, leaving care for specified reasons in 2020/21 (change from 2019/20) is below.

- 6.3% (29) Adopted (a decrease from 55)
- 18.7% (82) To live with parents, relatives, or other person, with or without parental responsibility (a decrease from 139)
- 3.0% (14) Residence / Child Arrangements Order (an increase from 11)
- 13.3% (61) Special Guardianship Order (a decrease from 73)
- 13.5% (62) Independent living (a decrease from 64)
- 9.6% (44) Aged 18 and remained with current carers (not previously collected)
- 35.7% (164) Care ceased for any other reason (an increase from 159)

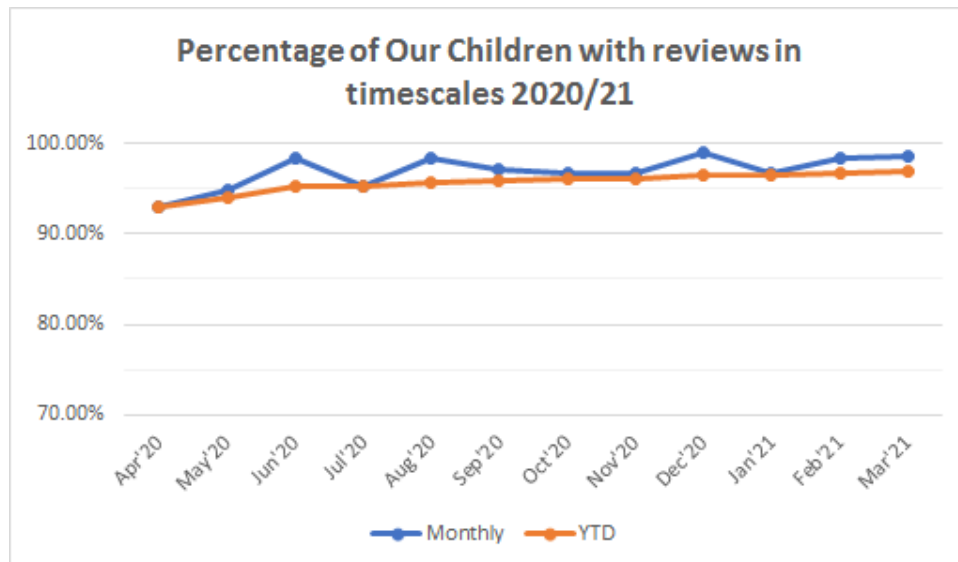


The chart above shows that Care ceased for any other reason (Other) continues to be the most common outcome for Our Children ceasing to be looked after. This tends to be the cohort of Our Children who turn 18 during the year and children whose Care Order has been discharged, an illustration of positive planning for children.

3. OUR CHILDREN STATUTORY REVIEWS

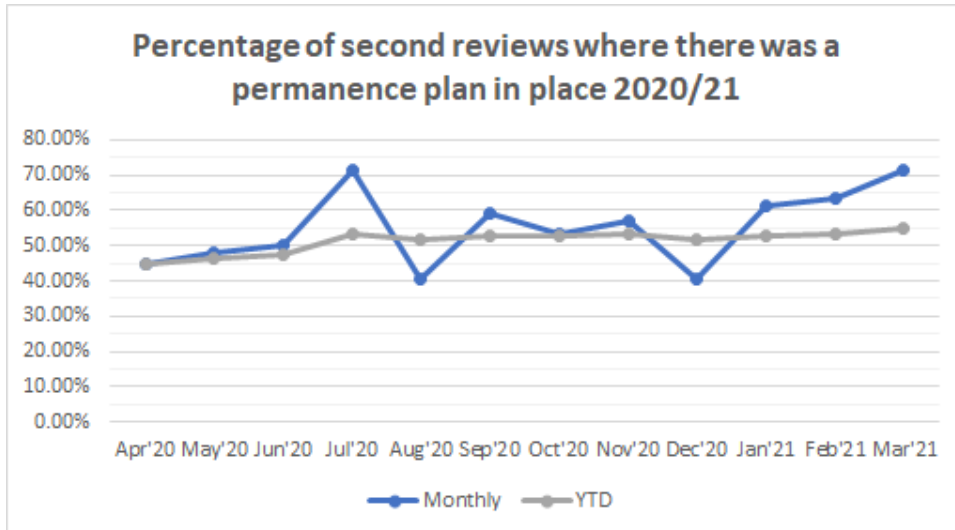
3.1 Timeliness of Our Children Reviews

The performance of Our Children Reviews held in timescale has fluctuated between 93.1% and 99.1% over the course of the year (April 2020 – March 2021). The end of year figure for 2020-21 is 96.8% (2019-20 is 98.6%). It is positive the overall performance of timeliness of reviews has remained strong this year, with less than a 2% decrease. The data demonstrates that children are having regular independent oversight in a timely way of their plan and progress against the plan.



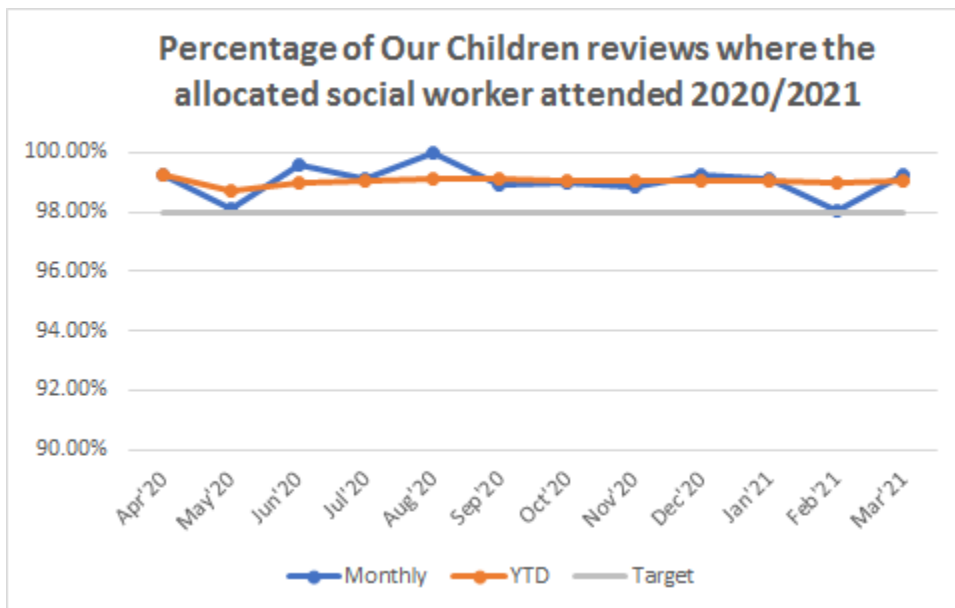
3.2 Achieving Permanency for Children and young people

In 2020/21 the end of year figure of children who had a permanence plan identified at the second review was 54.89%. The YTD figure has remained fairly static at mid 50%. The expectation is that a Permanence Planning meeting is held before the child's second review which informs the Care Plan. IROs should be ensuring this takes place. There was a query over the options of the recording of the Permanence Plan by the second review which limited the IROs responses. This has now been amended and clarified with more options so should evidence improved performance as we go forward. We know this is an area of required improvement for robust planning for children and young people. We know that Social Workers consider the primary and contingency plan for children, but this is not yet strongly evidenced. By increasing the evidence of Permanency Planning Meeting, we will ensure that meaningful discussions take place and the plan articulated well for children to be successful in achieving secure permanence and that we are ambitious in this. The outcome of this for children is that more children will have secure permanency plans in place by their second review.



3.3 Social Worker Attendance and Reports to Our Children Reviews

In 2020/21 the end of year figure of reviews where the allocated SW (or TM) attended was 99.28% (an increase from 95% in 2019-20). This is a good outcome in terms of practice and improvement which was assisted through informal and formal challenge by IROs. It is important for Our Children and their outcomes that their allocated Social Worker who knows them well attends their meetings and contributes to their plans.



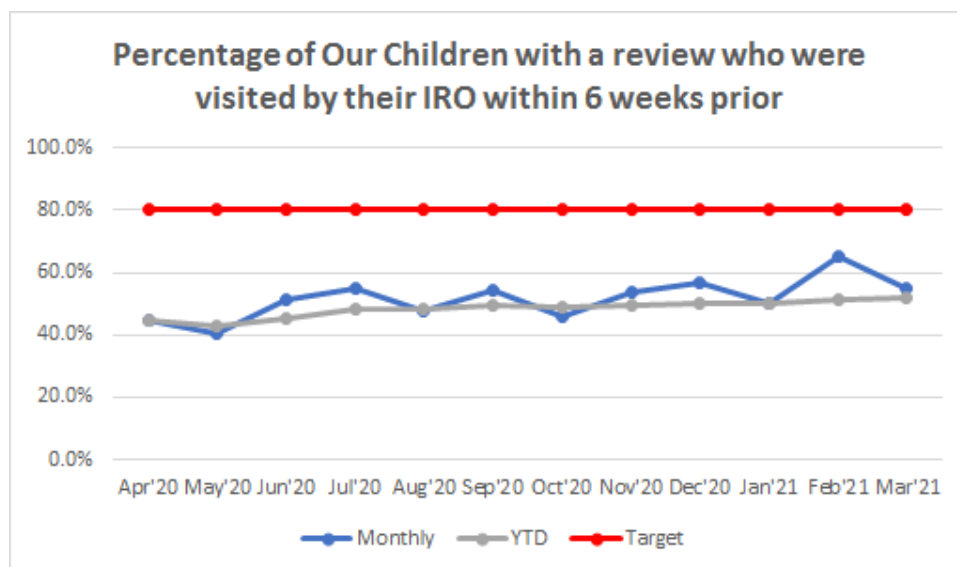
4.PARTICIPATION & ENGAGEMENT

4.1 IRO engagement & Visits to Children & Young People

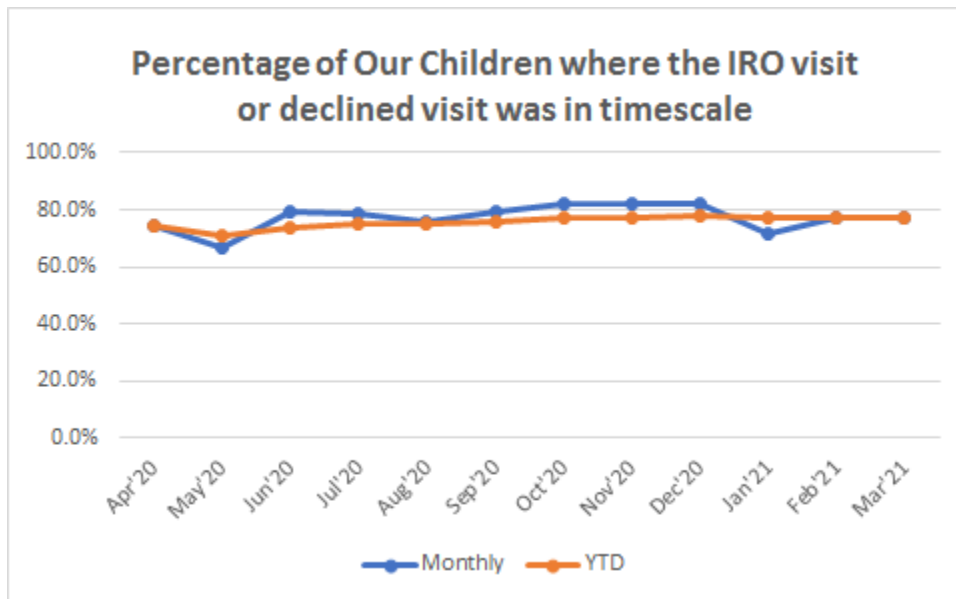
A key part of the IRO role is to ensure that children have been consulted about their views and have their wishes and feelings given due consideration in plans for their care. In March 2020 we took the decision that this would take place using virtual methods as we entered the initial lockdown for COVID19, and this was carried out in a variety of ways by IROs ringing carers and young people and arranging video calls or telephone calls.

IROs endeavoured to continue to speak privately with our children in the six weeks before their reviews. The virtual methods allowed IROs to continue to speak with children to consult about their meeting, who will attend, the timing and agenda and how best to conduct it virtual. This year IROs continued to encourage Our Children to participate in their meeting and build the child's confidence to co-chair where appropriate despite this providing challenges virtually. IROs have continued to utilise a range of tools to assist the children and young people to share their wishes and feelings.

While all children were offered virtual visits or telephone discussions before their meetings, we know that some younger children will have struggled to engage with virtual visits or telephone contact but equally some older children and young people preferred this option. The proportion of visits taking place in 2020/21 has averaged 51.8%, a decrease from 58.3% in 2019/20. As restrictions have lifted there is a focus on returning to face to face visits and reviews to ensure that maintaining meaningful relationships with children are underpinned by practice that promotes this.



As from last year, we are now able to measure how many children declined a visit within the 6 weeks prior to the review, which is 25% of total cases for 2020/21. If this measure was included within the percentage of Our Children who the IRO contacted 6 weeks prior to the review measure, then the overall percentage in timescale for 2020/21 increases to 77.4%.



This year 860 children declined a visit with the IRO within six weeks prior to the review. When children do not wish to see their IRO a range of alternative methods are offered to ensure they can share their views, set their agenda and be able to influence their care plans. Some children decline the visit choosing instead to attend their review and share their views themselves. Others agree to speak to the IRO on the day before their meeting starts. Every effort is made to ensure the child's voice can be heard, ideally directly from them, but some children choose to ask their Social Worker, parent, foster carer, teacher or advocate to share their views on their behalf.

We have continued to send all children an invitation explaining how we are conducting reviews during COVID19 and encouraging them to use the Mind Of My Own App or offered telephone contact, text, email or 'Have your Say' booklets. Young people are also provided with the advocacy service where they wish to have independent support to have their views considered.

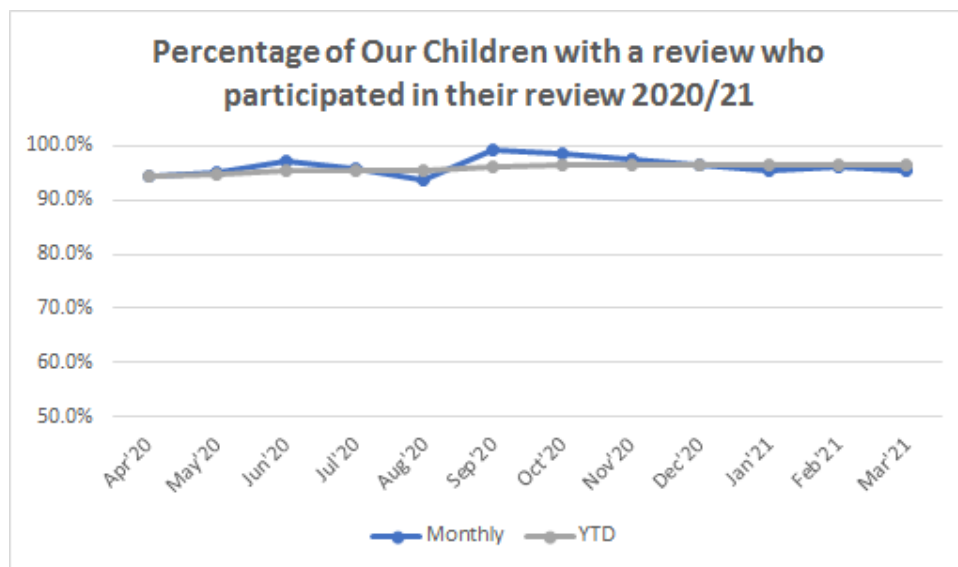
We know the next year and changes in the working restrictions mean we need to work differently with children and young people to engage them and will therefore focus next year on ensuring that all visits are face to face to build relationships up again. We will consider the material we use with children to explain why it is important for IROs to visit them face to face and how this can influence how their review meetings take place. We hope to see the numbers of our Children being seen increase and the numbers of declined visits reduce.

4.2 Participation and Engagement of Children in Our Children Reviews

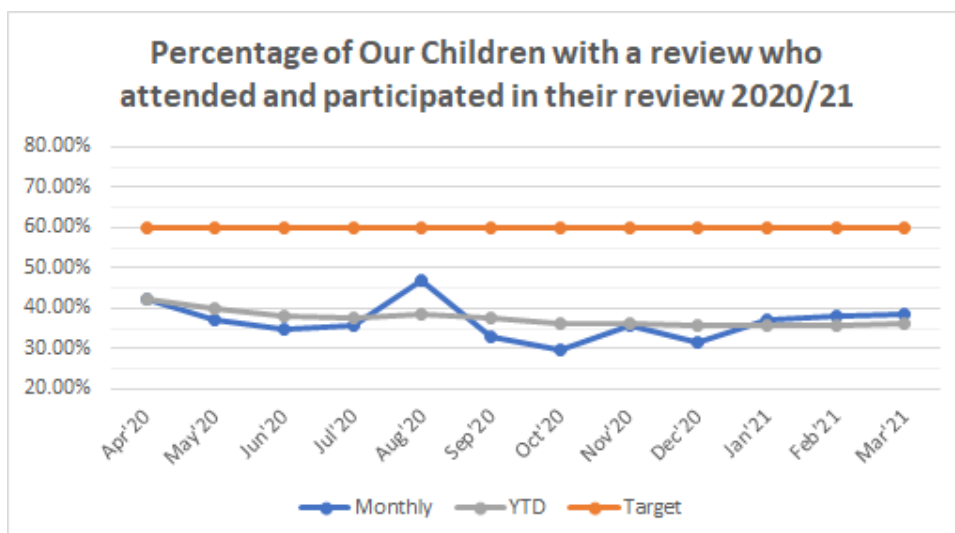
The key priority for Manchester and a primary objective of the IRO service is to ensure children are central to the decisions made about them and that they actively participate in the meetings about their care plans. A key element in delivering this objective is the measure of the young person's participation in the Statutory Review of their care plan and

care arrangements. IROs have worked hard and creatively over this period by being in contact with children over telephone, text, emails, WhatsApp to ensure that Our Children participate and engage in their reviews in a way that is meaningful and that their voices are heard using a variety of methods.

Overall **participation/engagement in the review process** has remained at 96.3%³ in 2020/21. This is a positive and reflects the dedication of the IROs in Manchester to ensure that children are given every opportunity to engage virtually through a variety of methods. There had been some anecdotal evidence suggested that the use of technology for children had meant that the participation was greater, however this does not reflect any increase in attendance.



The proportion of **children attending their reviews** has decreased from 48.4%³ in 2019/20 to 36.13% in 2020/21. This is disappointing for IROs especially given in the early period of the lockdown in March-May 2020 IROs felt that the use of technology may increase opportunities for children to attend virtually. We now know in hindsight that moving to only offering virtual reviews to children and young people meant that children felt less engaged and able to attend. IROs have fed back that some younger children struggled to engage during virtual meetings or just decided they didn't wish to attend but some older children preferred the opportunity to participate virtually.



³ Please note, children aged under 4 at the time of the review or those with no PN code are not included in any of the above measures.

The face-to-face visit and the IROs relationship with the child are significant factors in children feeling supported to attend their meetings and co-chair. It is clear from the data that the virtual option was not as effective as initially considered by IROs. IROs are keen to improve these figures going forward to demonstrate the robust relationships they have with Our Children to ensure that they are supported and encouraged to attend their reviews. Before the lockdown children and young people would be visited by their IRO face to face and this would assist in developing a trusting relationship where children and young people would feel supported, feel more able to attend their review, actively participate and co-chair. The numbers of children attending and participating in their reviews have always been an area for focus and positive ambition in Manchester. Over the last five years we have failed to see a significant increase in this percentage. As a service we need to review and respond differently if we are to achieve our ambition, this will include how IROs can be creative and demonstrate new ways of working to increase attendance that is purposeful for the child.

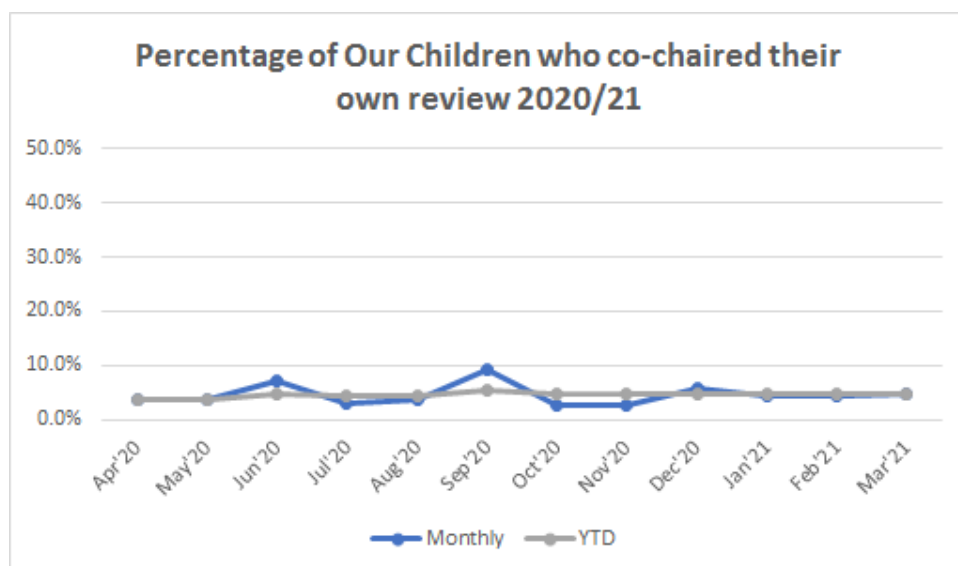
Whilst we are disappointed in the percentage of children attending and participating, we are assured that children have continued to participate with the percentage for participation remaining strong 96.3%. This is due to IROs ensuring that children have the right support to speak or adults they identify who they want to represent them. The IRO represents their wishes, feelings & views of their Care Plan or a key professional or carer represents their voice in the reviews. Children continue to be given choices on how they can participate and IROs are keen to ensure that they are given a variety of ways and people who can represent their wishes, feelings and views within their review.

The **minutes of reviews** continue to be written in a letter to the child and young person, avoiding the use of jargon. Young people provide positive feedback regarding this style and report having a greater understanding of their care plans, what people are worried about, how well they are doing and what the next steps are. This provides them with a greater understanding of the agreed recommendations and the responsibility of others in

supporting them to achieve. We believe this empowers them to be able to have influence over their planning. During the time of writing the reviews minutes as a letter to the child having achieved consistency across the service the next area of focus will be in improving the quality of those letters. We need to refocus on the purpose of the letter and how to ensure it is written to the individual child with key information that is important to them, building on examples of excellent practice. We will also seek to coproduce with children.

4.3 Our Children co-chairing their reviews

IROs continue to support and encourage young people to chair/ co-chair their own review and to set their own agendas where appropriate. We had set a provisional target of 45% over the previous years. While we continue to fall below this target, we are confident that children are well supported to engage in their reviews. The focus moving forward needs to consider more how we support young people to be empowered to co-chair their own reviews with more support from their IROs. This year the proportion has fallen to 14.6%, which is a decrease from 2019/2020 when we reached 20.8%. We believe the Covid lockdown, virtual visits and meetings has impacted on the number of children feeling able to co-chair their meetings virtually. As discussed above the increase focus of IRO visits on planning for children’s reviews will hopefully have a positive impact on more children cochairing their own reviews. We will set targets for achieving this with specific groups, eg those aged 12 – 18 rather to track achievements, than a blanket over-all percentage

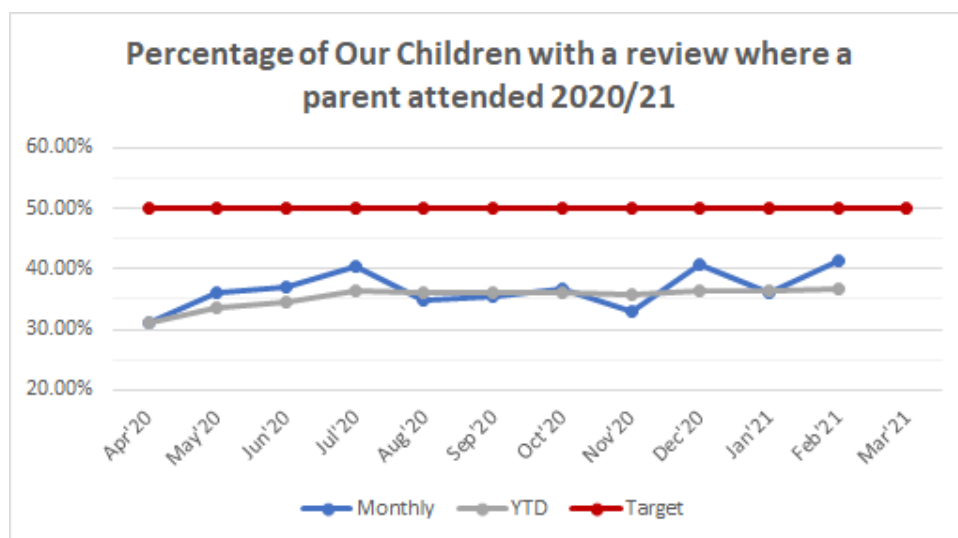


4.4 Parents attendances at reviews

We have seen an increase in parental engagement in reviews this year, which is extremely positive. We have always actively encouraged parents to engage in the review process,

wherever appropriate, as it is important to children that parent(s) can contribute to planning, share an understanding of their child’s journey, retain a significant role and presence in their child’s life and demonstrate a level of commitment and loyalty to their child even if living apart. In 2019/20 the proportion was 34.0%. This year it has increased to 38%. Feedback from parents have said they prefer to attend the meetings virtually as this means they don’t have to travel long distances or sit in a room with involved professionals. Ideally, going forward we will support parents to attend meetings face to face when safe to do so but given the feedback virtual attendance will remain an option.

We set an initial target of 50% of parents attending reviews and whilst accepting we have not achieved that this year, we believe we need to be more ambitious around parental engagement in reviews by attending and contributing to their reviews when not appropriate for them to attend or the young person wishes for them not to attend. We want to promote parental participation as we know this is often important for children that they know professionals have relationship with their birth family. In 2021/2022 we will ensure that parents not attending reviews will be consulted as part of the review process to demonstrate the importance the IROs place on the relationship between children and their families.



As part of their overviews, IROs strive to ensure appropriate challenge is made regarding efforts to identify the whereabouts of parents who are no longer in touch with social work services to include their views in the Care Planning Reviews. IROs will also offer to meet separately or call parents who cannot attend in order to capture the parent’s views regarding the care plans and arrangements for their child.

4.5 Corporate Parenting Panel

Manchester has a well-established Corporate Parenting Panel, chaired by Councillor Garry Bridges that meets monthly. The Corporate Parenting Panel is made up of representatives of the Council, its partner agencies and experts my experience, which has been actively involved in the monthly panel shaping and influencing development and improvement in services. The Strategic Lead for Safeguarding and Practice Improvement is the strategic lead for Corporate Parenting.

During the pandemic year Corporate Parenting Panel have had several presentations from frontline practitioner that demonstrated the commitment from staff in ensure that the drive and ambitious for Our Children remained paramount throughout the pandemic. This included:

- Driving the voice of children in the permanence service
- Improving outcomes for children in the permanence service
- Engaging children in their reviews – IRO Service

This arrangement will be reviewed in 2021/22 to ensure that it remains connect to the experiences of the children we are responsible for.

4.6 Mind of My Own

Manchester continued to invest in the Mind of My Own App as an online communication tool. We have had some success in using this to allow children and young people to communicate with their IRO. The app is an additional tool that supports children and young people to express any worries, highlight good news or their achievements and give feedback for their reviews and other meetings.

Using Mind of My Own in 2020/2021 we know:

- Mind of My Own was used by 240 children between June 2020 and July 2021 either through children using the app themselves or completing statements with their workers.
- During this period 52 workers accessed their accounts to complete statements with children and young people and 5 of these were IROs.
- We have worked hard in Manchester to promote the app with children and young people to ensure every option is explored to gather their wishes and feelings however, children have also continued to engage with IROs using other methods. While we have seen children and young people enjoy the app most children prefer to communicate via face-to-face visits, phone calls, texting and email.

Children mainly used the app to score specific questions, “I feel safe” 1-10, “I enjoy school” 1-10. The scoring questions are extremely more popular than the free text boxes. There is not an ability to collate all the responses from children as they go to the individual worker for the young person but from dip sampling statements, we know children generally like to

talk about what they are doing, their likes and dislikes. We know the younger children enjoying using the app with their IRO and this is an interactive session during the IRO visit.

4.7 Children's Rights

In Manchester the Children's Rights service continues to be provided by NYAS. This arrangement has been in place since 2018. The contract specification covers those children and young people who have or are in receipt of support from Social Care and specifically covers for Our Children:

- Looked after Children in residential homes both within and outside the Council's administrative boundaries;
- Looked after Children in foster care both within and outside the Council's administrative boundaries;
- Manchester young people who are care leavers.

Referral breakdown 2020/2021:

Within the reporting period 01/04/2020 to 31/02/2021 NYAS received 232 referrals for Our Children Most referrals came from Social Workers, Young people and IROs. Most of the referrals received were for young people between the ages of 12 and 19 years. The youngest referral received was from a 6-year-old. The average length of time for contact to take place following referral was 3 working days. Social Workers referred 7 times more children than the IROs to NYASS in the reporting year. We know that IROs are proactive in promoting Children's Advocates and will often ask Social Workers to discuss with children consent for them to make a referral to Children's Advocate.

Issue based Advocacy and Themes 2020/2021:

The list below describes the most common themes being referred to NYAS over the last year with the top being the most frequent down to the least frequent being around pathway planning:

- Help in meetings
- Placement moves
- Contact/family
- Issues in placement
- Social worker/LA
- Support ahead of LAC Reviews
- Against Local Authority/complaints
- Appropriate Support
- Pocket Money or Personal Allowance
- Education
- Homelessness / Unsuitable Accommodation
- Transition/Adult services

- View Personal/Medical Files
- Immigration Issues
- Pathway planning

NYAS has supported 27 children and young people to make a complaint. 23 Complaints were resolved at Stage One of the complaint process and 3 complaints were referred on to Stage Two. One young person was supported by the Local Ombudsman. Most of the complaints were regarding support from Social Workers or Leaving Care Personal Assistants. This included waiting too long for information regarding their care plans or requests for changes of Social Worker or Leaving Care Personal Assistant.

The themes identified within the regular information provided by NYASS is fed into the Corporate Parenting Panel and shapes and influences service delivery. We know that the issues raised above are the issues that IROs are aware of and regularly advocate for on behalf of Our Child.

5. QUALITY ASSURANCE

5.1 The role of IRO in Quality Assurance

One of the key functions of a IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. The oversight of IROs is critical in providing independent monitoring and providing a high support and high challenge environment for improving the outcomes for Our Children. Over the last two years we have developed our approach to quality assurance and in 2020/2021 we have introduced a new oversight practice standard that provides greater scrutiny between reviews and encourages IROs to consider the impact of the interventions of the progression of the child's plan. IROs are expected to add a detailed IRO Overview between reviews which highlights actions achieved and actions which have not been completed. This will ensure monitoring of progress between the child's meetings and identify any delay. The IRO can discuss any gaps with the Social Worker and consider whether a Dispute Resolution is required.

The Quality Assurance Framework, Dispute Resolution process and IRO oversights are designed to effectively identify, monitor and achieve service improvement for Our Children. The impact of these activities is discussed below.

5.2 Quality Assurance Framework

The Quality Assurance Framework revised in 2019 is now well embedded in the Safeguarding Improvement Unit. The Quality Assurance Framework set out not just how we gather information about children's lives but how we evidence that the information that we gather includes the voice and influence of children and young people, and that we can see the impact of good quality of practice through better outcomes for children. The framework

promotes the importance of Manchester's Golden Threads as our foundation for practice improvement.

- Good Quality Assessments
- Good Quality Plans
- Impact chronology supports decision making
- Good management oversight
- Voice and experience of child / young person evident throughout
- Evidence of strong engagement with parents, family and carers throughout our involvement.

There are clear expectations in the framework for monthly audits to be completed alongside practitioners and seen as learning spaces. It recognises that auditing activity alone will not improve the quality of practice. In the Safeguarding Unit we have focused on improving our direct observations and obtaining feedback from Our Children in 2020/2021.

5.2.1 Learning from audits -

From April 2020 to March 2021, we completed 48 audits in SIU, all have been completed alongside the IRO. We have completed learning circles where the need for shared learning was identified. Our workforce learning and development team collate and analyse the learning from whole service auditing to report on audit themes and recommend action plans, which the IRO service feed into.

Over the last twelve months the key themes and the impact for children and families in Manchester have been:

Assessment & planning.

There has been some strong evidence of planning in audits carried out for children, including evidence of EHCPs in place, effective teams around the child that knew the children well and supported change.

The audits showed good examples of assessments and assessments being updated, which had been a significant focus for IROs & CP Chairs around challenging when assessments had not been updated. Assessments considered the child's life experience and used a strength-based approach with families to evidence protective factors and worries. Whilst this remains an area of focus, we are seeing an improvement in children having updated assessments that are meaningful and support the planning.

Voice & influence of Children and outcomes

We have seen in audits that children have benefited from stable placements and that a number of children are thriving in their permanent home.

There have been some excellent examples throughout the year of direct work with children and young people and child friendly safety plans that are codesigned.

There is some good evidence of direct work both for our Children and the family on Child Protection Planning. The workers, and IROs know the children well and can articulate this throughout the audit and within recordings.

A direct observation throughout the year recognised how powerful it was to have the young person in the meeting to get their feelings across. Being a video meeting helped too, to see how it impacted on him & how strongly he felt around his previous recommendations. The IRO handled it very sensitively and gave good challenge to school.

There is some good evidence of direct work both for our Children and the family on Child Protection Planning. The workers, and IROs know the children well and can articulate this throughout the audit and within recordings.

Parental engagement

During this year we have been able to evidence some creative ways of engaging families. This is certainly not considered to be the primary method of engagement but used to promote engagement with parents that may not have previously come face to face or been involved in their children's planning. A good example of this is the use of technology to engage a father in the assessment process within an audit this month who lived overseas and Our Children's Reviews when parents would have not previously been invited but have joined virtually at the child's request, which feels safer. It's positive to see staff embrace new ways of working and using technology to break down barriers.

Role of the IRO

The audits have showed the strength of the role of the IRO in oversight for children and young people. IROs know the children well and communicate well with Social Workers to ensure there is no drift or delay in the progression of the plan. This activity is not always routinely strongly evidenced on the child's file and is known by the service as an area of improvement to better evidence our impact.

It is really encouraging that the IROs and CP Chairs use the auditing experience to reflect on the planning for children. The month's quality assurance sessions have focused on how we effectively challenge and support to better improve outcomes for children. This has included how we use the dispute resolution process to better evidence practice improvement and track impact.

5.2.2 Direct Observations

In 2020/2021 we continued to undertake regular monthly observations of IROs practice. This took place virtually and the IRO Manager joined the virtual meetings as an observer with the permission of the child. This has been extremely positive for the service and has demonstrated that while the method of conducting meetings was different the quality remained good in respect of achieving the objectives of a review meeting. The observations showed that IROs are well prepared in advance of the meeting and updated on issues in

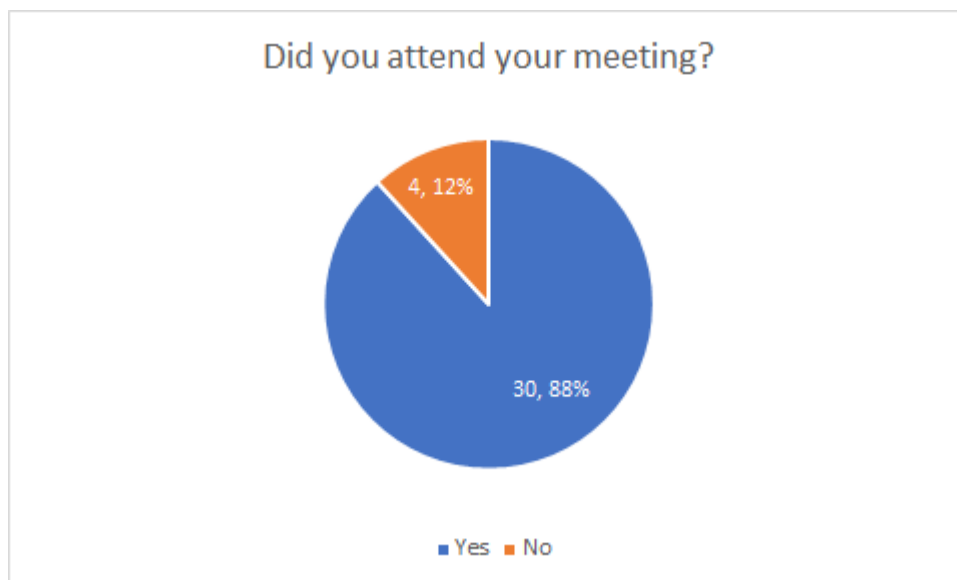
respect of the child. They are robust in their oversight of progress of care plans and continued to offer challenge when required while keeping children at the centre.

Despite the virtual methods there was evidence of a positive working relationship between the child, family, professionals and the IRO with an effective team around the child. Parents do attend but if they do not there is evidence of IROs speaking to them after the child's meeting. Children do contribute to their meetings either by attending all of the meeting or part of the meeting. Some children chose not to attend their meeting after speaking to their IRO about their wishes and feelings during their visit. What we need to improve - IROs need to ensure they agree timescales for Recommendations in the meeting with involved professionals; lack of attendance by involved professionals needs to be challenged; Signs of Safety needs to be more robustly used in children's meetings always starting with What's working Well; IROs need to consistently gather parent's views.

5.3 Feedback from children & young people -

This year we continued to contact children and young people to ask them to be involved in influencing the service we deliver. We asked children and young people in October 2020 & March 2021 would they complete a feedback form online titled "Tell us how your IRO is doing". The following charts shows some of the questions that was asked and the responses to the questions.

34 children completed an online questionnaire in October 2020. Key findings:





QUOTES FROM OUR CHILDREN about the role of their IRO:

“She listened and is understanding”

“she listens and understands me. She gets things sorted out for me”

“someone who supports me”

“she is very good and straight to point and chairs meeting very well”

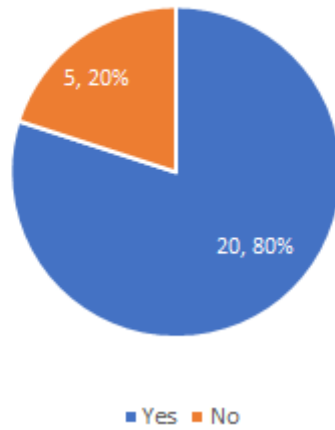
“he is very interested in what I want. He is funny I believe he will help if I ask for it”

“Someone who takes the time to listen and be interested in me and cares about my future”

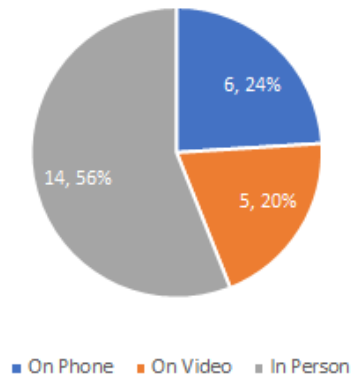
“Good listener and supports your views ☐”

25 children completed an online questionnaire in March 2021. Key findings:

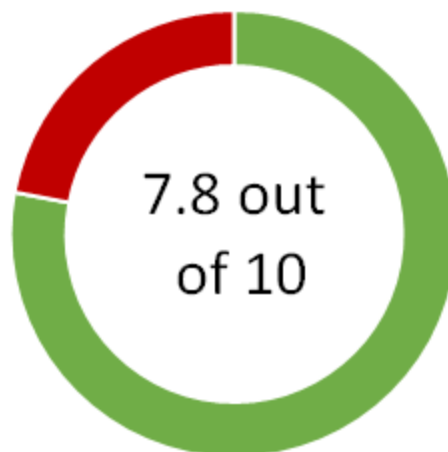
Do you feel comfortable attending your meeting?



How would you like your future meetings to be held?



Rate your meeting





QUOTES FROM OUR CHILDREN about the role of their IRO:

“my IRO is one of the best.”

“she always listens to my wishes and desires and is good at chairing meetings”

“she is someone I can talk to and trust. She listens to me point of view”.

“we have a sort of close relationship not too close but I feel very comfortable talking with her about any problems or any good things happening in the moment”

5.4 Dispute Resolutions

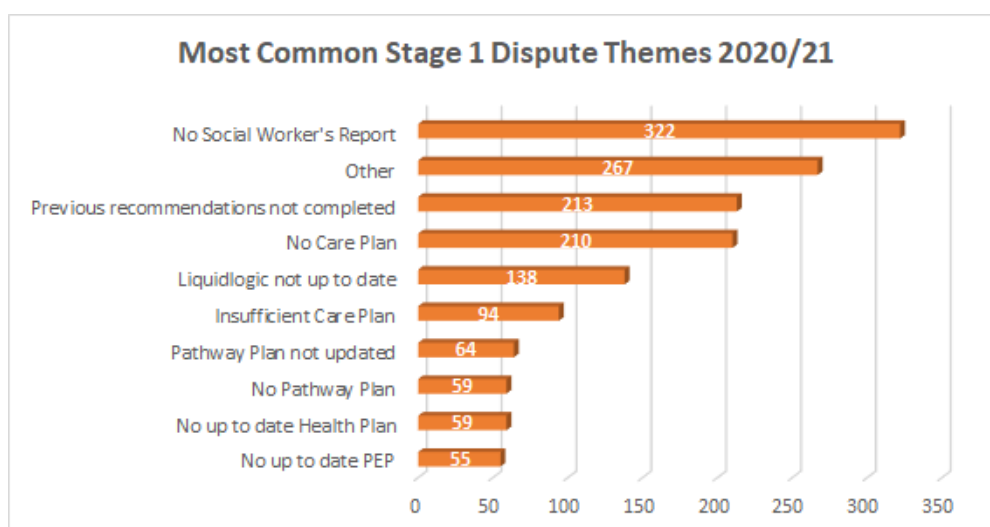
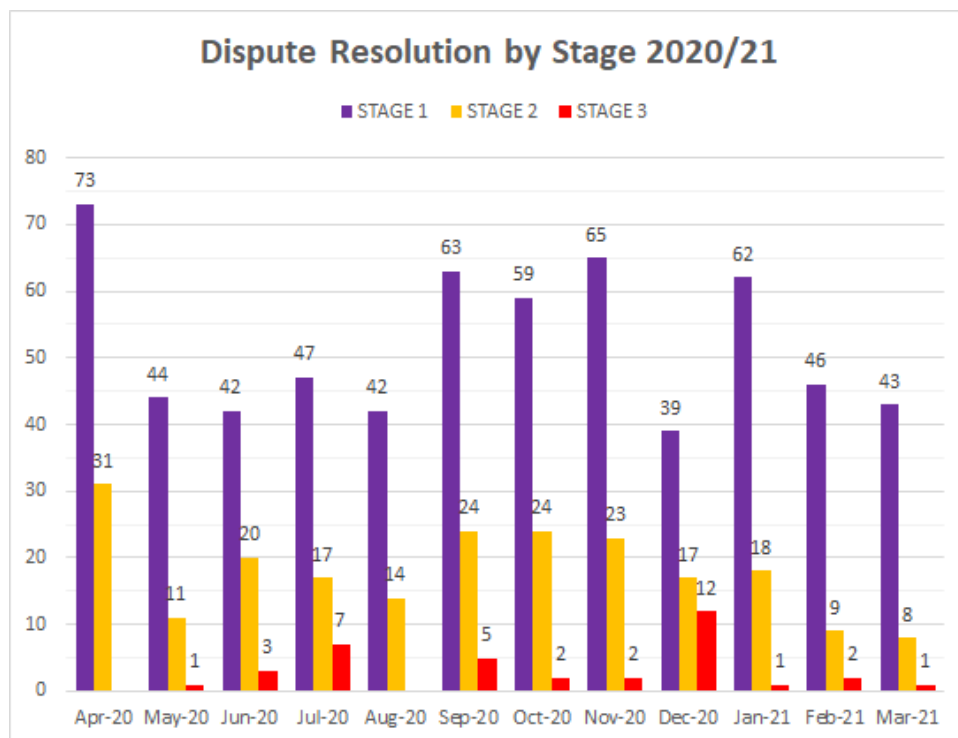
The IRO Handbook clearly sets out the importance of the Dispute Resolutions process and the role the IRO plays in resolving problems that arise out of the care planning process for Our Children. There is a well-established Dispute Resolutions process in Manchester that both IROs and Social Work teams are familiar with. The IROs actively seek resolution to issues through effective communication but are confident to escalate through the Dispute Resolutions stages when resolution is not achieved to Safeguarding Managers, Services Lead and Strategic Leads/Heads of Service, Deputy Director, Director and CAFCASS.

The IROs engage with colleagues across Social Work teams to resolve issues at the earliest opportunity and in a timely manner informally wherever possible. Where there has been no timely response or where resolution cannot be reached the issue will be escalated through the six-stage process. The aim is for issues to always be resolved within 20 working days as per statutory guidance in the IRO Handbook.

The data below regarding Dispute Resolutions is from April 2020 to March 2021. The data shows that in this period 625 Stage 1 Dispute Resolutions were completed which averages 52 per month. This is higher than the average in 2019/20 which was 43 per month. Looking at like for like data from 2019/20 (i.e., for the period July 2019-March 2020 & July 2020-

March 2021) there is a decrease in the number of Stage one disputes (685 compared to 466). This is positive as we have been promoting throughout the year the importance of resolving practice issues informally to better evidence swift response to concerns about a child’s care plan. What we are confident now is that we are escalating the right children

Stage two disputes remain constant at 153 compared to 154 while stage 3 disputes have increased from 12 to 32. This demonstrates that most disputes raised by the SIU reach a satisfactory resolution at Stage 1 of the process.



In 2020/2021 the main issue raised via the Dispute Resolution process was in respect of there being no Social Work Report prepared before a child’s meeting. This was also the

primary issue last year. This is reflective of the significant focus in January 2020 on improving the quality of the documentation for reviews. There has also been a focus on ensuring care plans were of a good standard and updated before the child's meeting. The themes from disputes have been fully considered by the service and reflect the service priorities throughout the year.

5.5 IRO Oversight

Part of the IROs role is to contribute to improving outcomes for our children with the core purpose being to ensure the care plan for a child fully reflects the child's needs and ensures that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration. Their role is to monitor the child's progress on an ongoing basis as well as reviewing the CLA Care Plan at regular intervals. To do this it was recognised that we need to:

- show regular oversight of the planning process,
- monitor the pace of progress and
- robustly challenge where there is drift and delay
- provide scrutiny of the progress and effectiveness of the child's care plan between reviews.

Guidance was introduced in September 2020 to improve IRO oversights and the quality of the oversights. This includes check-ins and mid-point overviews to ensure recommendations are being progressed. It considers the progression of the planning, the voice and influence of the child in the planning, evidence of parental involvement and impact, management oversight influencing the progression and direction of the plan and overall analysis and impact on the child. The impact of this is IROs have had greater oversight on the planning for children and when Dispute Resolutions are raised, they are timelier in improving outcomes for children.

6.OUTCOMES & IMPACT OF THE SERVICE

6.1 Progress made in 2020/2021

In writing the 2019/2020 Annual Report we were ambitious in setting out what we hoped to achieve in 2020/2021. We had entered the COVID19 pandemic and felt that we had significant learning to take and set goals to achieve in improving the service and co-producing with children in 2020/2021. We set ourselves the following goals to improve the overall outcomes for Our Children and deliver a consistently good service to Our Children and while this report clearly evidences that we have been successful in continuing to deliver an IRO service that provides timely reviews for children and prioritises their participation.

(1) To deliver the service in an agile way that is responsive to new ways of working while continuing to engage Our Children, their parents, carers, Social Workers and professionals.

We have utilised virtual platforms to ensure we remained effective in delivering the service during the Covid 19 pandemic. We built on our knowledge, skills, and resources for purposeful engagement to visit children and chair their meetings virtually. IROs are now confident in using a variety of technology to arrange and chair reviews. Most reviews took place over Google Meet (March – October 2020) Microsoft Teams (November 2020 – March 2021). Children and professionals were encouraged to turn on cameras as it was felt that being able to see each other enhanced the experience.

While staff generally worked from home during the lockdown period they adapted well to the use of technology. IROs ensured children continued to receive the support and oversight they have come to expect from their IRO. We feel that children continued to have good communication with IROs throughout the year but in hindsight, in terms of engaging children, a more child centered approach would have been to look at ways of continuing face to face visits in a safe way.

(2) We will focus on timeliness and the effectiveness of reviews.

IRO performance in respect of reviews taking place in timescale remains high. Observation and audit have assisted in identifying the effectiveness of reviews for Our Children with themes noted in the body of the report. At the time of writing the report last year we were ambitious about focusing on the timeliness of reviews and engaging children but due to Covid the ambition in terms of doing things differently didn't happen as planned. The focus was on continuing to do what we did well. We know we need to continue to focus on the quality of the reviews and ensuring children are at the centre of everything we do. This report has spoken about how we have yet to evidence the impact of some of the IRO activity around increasing attendance at reviews and the impact of this on children taking more of a central role in their reviews.

(3) Focus on the importance of continuous assessment and planning to improve the quality of decision making and the Care Plans presented to reviews.

IROs have taken the lead in ensuring that each child has a current Child and Family Assessment in place. They have managed this through a mix of discussion, support and challenge. Targets set in terms of updating assessments at least 12 monthly have made a difference to children and young people. The expectation has been that along with the SW Report an updated Care Plan has to be completed by the Social Worker prior to each review ensuring that children and young people consistently have a current plan. We see evidence that children are having more informed plans that are developed from an assessment of their needs. By focusing on continuous assessment, we are ensuring that we are ambitious for children in ensuring that their outcomes around being secure, happy and safe are assessed and analysed at regular intervals of their life.

(4) To strengthen the quality assurance function by regular feedback throughout the year, increased direct observations, and partnership feedback.

SIU Managers have undertaken monthly observations of staff. Themes have been identified in terms of practice and IROs have been spoken to individually and as a group to ensure practice is informed and shapes service delivery by the learning identified as outlined in the body of the report. The IRO links to Localities, Health and Education have meant we have had feedback on how we can work better together. We have spoken about the impact of this in the report in terms of a reduction in escalations and improvements in what we see in audits.

We have revised the Oversight procedures for IROs and this better reflects the Quality Assurance Framework with a focus on assessment, planning, voice and influence of children, parents/carers and management oversight.

We have again this year sought feedback from children and young people in the form of a questionnaire. This year we completed 2 questionnaires and again focused on engaging the carers and children via telephone calls to seek feedback and provided an online questionnaire. We are proud with our response rate, which was around 65% of children contacted responded. The vision has been more ambitious around how we sought feedback but given the situation faced, continuing to seek views of children and young people to influence practice is something we consider an achievement. The feedback from Our Children has helped us refocus on face-to-face visits being seen as a priority and improving the preparation for reviews and encouragement for children to consider how they would like their meeting to take place. The audits have provided assurance about the service we deliver and demonstrate that we know ourselves well. We know the areas we need to improve on and the priorities, which is what children have told us. As a result, we have ensured that we are clear with IROs in our expectations around all visits and reviews should be face to face. The virtual approach should be the exception with a clear rationale about why and the impact on the child.

(5) Develop closer working relationships with Localities.

IRO Managers continued to attend meetings virtually with Locality Managers throughout 2020/2021 to offer their oversight and input in respect of practice issues leading to delay for Our Children. IROs have been linked to Localities and have attended weekly workshops, listened to the views of Social Workers and Team Managers and fed this back to SIU to inform our practice. Audit outcomes and themes have been shared with Heads of Service via Closing the Loop meetings to ensure any compliments or areas for improvement are fed back directly.

We have seen this year again the reduction of formal dispute resolutions, which we believe is attributed to the work carried out with localities to improve greater understanding of the role of the IRO and their contribution to improving outcomes for children.

(6) Continue to increase the engagement of Our children ahead of their review.

We said we would do this by ensuring we promote the importance of the IRO role in speaking to Our Children in private prior to every review. Prior to lockdown the IROs were visiting children face to face within 6 weeks of their review whenever possible. IROs would speak to children and young people alone if they felt confident to do this. IROs were recording the visit and ensuring that their views, wishes and agenda items were discussed in their meeting and linked to appropriate Recommendations. Whilst we have not been able to carry out face to face visits the focus of the virtual contact with children ahead of their reviews have continued to ensure that their voice is strong in their reviews and that they are given opportunities to consider how they best wanted to participate in their review or important issues to them discussed / raised.

(7) We will focus on more qualitative learning from disputes resolutions.

The focus has changed in Dispute Resolutions from process to quality with an expectation that the impact on the child is noted in any challenge. Some changes have come about as a result of IRO links to Permanence and feedback from Social Workers and Team Managers. They fed back the importance of discussion with Social Workers and Team Managers before progressing a Stage 1 Dispute Resolution and this has been implemented consistently.

In 2021 we have started revising our Dispute Resolution form to better evidence the impact on the child on their health, safety, happiness, permanence and ensure we are being ambitious for them and raising disputes when we short fall of achieving this.

7.KEY PRIORITIES 2021-2022

Priority 1: To place children and young people at the centre of everything we do.

- We will focus on letters to children being good quality and sent out in timescale. *To do this we will ensure letters are produced with each child in mind, thinking about how they would like the letter to be presented.*
Consulting with children in a meaningful way about their Care Plan and ensuring we are ambitious for them. *To do this we will challenge when we do not have an up to date Care Plan and will seek assurance from children that they are involved in their Care Plan.*
- We will co-produce with children to better drive service delivery. *To do this we will set up a task and finish group with children and young people so they can influence how their IRO works alongside them.*

Priority 2: Listen to and respond to children and young people.

- We will continue to hold timely reviews that are led by children. *To do this we will continue to focus on performance data to ensure we prioritise children's reviews.*

- Recommendations will be SMART and focussed on improving outcomes for the child and will be written in consultation with children and evidence what impact they will have on them. [To do this we will speak to all children about their recommendations and will evidence this in how we write our recommendations.](#)
- We will ensure that we drive issues important to children and be involved with practice improvement. [To do this we will identify themes and learning and ensure this is shared with localities and amongst ourselves to improve our expertise in children and their needs.](#)
- We will improve how we deliver our service by listen and responding to children. [To do this we will think creatively about how we engage children and young people in telling us what we do well and what we could do better. We will review the value and impact of the tools and services we use to engage and advocate for children and young people.](#)

Priority 3: We will being ambitious for Our Children

- We will ensure all children benefit from purposeful visits within 6 weeks of their review to ensure they are actively involved in their planning. [To do this we will continue to oversee the performance and have visits to children a key priority.](#)
- We will work to ensure all children have a good quality care plan by their second review. [To do this we will work with localities around what good quality care plans look like and concentrate on permanence from the start.](#)
- We will work to improve the number of children supported to attend their meetings and to co-chair to ensure that they are central to the planning. [To do this by increasing the number of visits to children face to face to improve relationships and promote the importance of co-chairing / meaningful engagement.](#)
- Achieving permanence for Our Children will be the focus of work for IROs. [To do this we will participate in the Child' Journey to Permanence Training.](#)
- We will continue to focus on the quality of Dispute Resolutions and refocus to ensure the impact on children is evidenced. [To do this we will redesign the approach and focus on impact.](#)
- We will continue to build strong and effective relationships with the SW Teams to ensure that we provide appropriate scrutiny and provide support in ensuring children receive the best service and achieve permanence at the earliest opportunity. [To do this we will continue and strengthen the links of each Safeguarding Manager and IRO to localities and specialist areas.](#)

To achieve our ambitions will we invest in our IROs learning and development and have a robust approach to quality assurance and review this monthly to ensure we can evidence impact for Children.

REFERENCES / Key Documents for further reading

IRO handbook: statutory guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked children, Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2010 (pp 9–12);

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National Children's Bureau. The Role of Independent Reviewing Officers Report 2014.

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Adoption and Children Act 2002, section 118;

www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/adoption/b0067811/adoption-legislation/adoption-and-children-act-2002

The care planning, placement and case review (England) regulations, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010;

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