

Safeguarding, Quality, Impact & Practice

# Independent Reviewing Officer's Annual Report 2023- 2024.

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# **Haringey Council – Children’s Services**

## **IRO Annual Report 2023/24**

### **Introduction**

This Annual Report details the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service from April 1, 2023, to March 31, 2024. It evaluates how the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service has influenced the planning and outcomes for children and young individuals in Haringey. The IRO’s have significant responsibility in ensuring that care plans cater to children's needs, integrate their perspectives, and ultimately improve outcomes.

Moreover, the report underscores the pivotal contribution of the Independent Reviewing Service in enhancing the quality of care planning for looked after children and elevating the standard of services offered by the Local Authority. Included is an exploration of the legal framework governing the IRO role, an introduction to the IRO team, an update on the previous year’s priorities, and an overview of Haringey’s current care population. It sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of the IRO Team’s contribution in securing positive outcomes for children.

The report considers the timeliness of reviews, the mechanisms through which IROs address concerns regarding a young person's care, and the involvement of young people and their families in statutory reviews. Furthermore, it evidences the achievements of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and sets out the priorities for the forthcoming year.

### **Purpose of service and legal context**

In compliance with section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal obligation. Specifically, the Care Planning, Placement, and Care Review (England) Regulations 2010 pertain to children in local authority care, aiming to enhance the quality of care planning processes to optimise outcomes for these children.

Within the legal framework of the IRO Handbook 2010, the role of the IRO is firmly established. It is mandated by law for local authorities to appoint an IRO for each child in care, whose principal duty is to ensure that the care plans for our children and young people fully address their needs, take into account their wishes and feelings, and align with the statutory responsibilities of the Local Authority, as outlined in Section 25B (1) of the Children Act 1989. These duties include monitoring the Local Authority's performance regarding the child's plans, participating in case reviews, ensuring the child's wishes and feelings are duly considered, and fulfilling any other function prescribed in regulations.

The IRO Handbook provides a comprehensive guide delineating the statutory roles, duties, as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of Local Authorities in establishing an effective IRO Service. It distinctly outlines two main functions of an IRO: chairing the child's review meeting and consistently monitoring the child's progress.

## Introduction to the IRO Service

Within the Engagement, Safeguarding & Quality Assurance Service under Children and Young People's Services, the IRO Service consists of registered Social Workers who are led by a Service Manager. Presently, the team consists of five highly experienced permanent IROs and one fixed-term IRO, collectively these bring diverse expertise to the table.

The diversity within the IRO Service mirrors the cultural backgrounds of the looked after children in Haringey. With proficiency in eight languages, the staff's linguistic abilities enrich the service's communication capabilities, especially when engaging with children with additional needs, utilising alternative communication methods where necessary.

IROs play a pivotal role in fostering consistent practice among those entrusted with the well-being of looked after children and care leavers. Their duty encompasses averting delays and ensuring effective care planning, prioritising the fulfilment of children's needs and the attainment of positive outcomes. They diligently monitor the local authority's actions as corporate parents, ensuring measures are promptly taken to address assessed needs and comply with care planning regulations. Furthermore, they have responsibility for identifying and communicating emerging concerns for the senior leadership team.

The enduring relationships forged by IROs with the children, young individuals, and families they oversee, contribute significantly to stability and continuity. Many children have had the same IRO for multiple years.

The management structure of the IRO Service remains steadfast, providing stability and support to the team.



## Training & Professional Development of the IRO Service

Haringey Children's Academy, Tri-X online procedures, Research in Practice, Making Research Count, My Learning and workshops organised via the Haringey Safeguarding Children's Partnerships form the professional development offer provided to IRO's regarding research developments, policy and legislative updates in addition to training opportunities both virtually and face to face.

Some of the learning and development by IROs in 2023/24 includes:



There are two fully qualified Practice Educators within the service with another IRO currently undertaking the PE course.

Additionally, the IRO service collectively utilises external resources and shares acquired knowledge and learning with colleagues, thereby enhancing the quality of service for children in the care of the local authority. For example, team meeting briefings have been conducted on topics such as the role of midway reviews in promoting permanence and reducing delays, the Champions Model, the use of trauma informed language through the Ways of Writing initiative, and the Proud to Be Me Project.

## Update on the IRO Service Priorities 2023-24

The IRO Service has made significant strides to enhance the outcomes for looked after children and young people. Key areas of development, as highlighted in the IRO annual report 23/24 are being actively addressed to provide meaningful and lasting improvements:

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

IROs have ensured review minutes are produced with each child in mind and we have worked hard to improve the efficiency and timeliness of delivering review minutes. This remains a service priority for 2024/25.

IROs remain dedicated to ensuring Care Plans are consistently up to date, addressing any situations that require improvement. With the introduction of the Liquid Logic system (LCS), Care Plans now form part of the Children Looked After (CLA) Pathway which promotes its completion before further reviews can be held. IROs and the IRO Service Manager have provided guidance and workshops to practitioners to help consider how the social worker reports informing reviews, can be strengthened to include proposed care plans in line with the changes in LCS.

## **Priority 2: Listen to and respond to children and young people**

Whilst we have maintained our focus on performance data, allowing us to prioritise children's reviews effectively, the way that data is collated has changed with the introduction of LCS. Work has been undertaken to help ensure that the data is more accurate to reflect the timeliness of reviews.

Work has been undertaken with each IRO to review the quality of their review minutes and ensure that review recommendations are SMARTer – there is further work planned around improving the quality, timeliness and recommendations of our minutes over the coming year.

Through our group reflective supervision and in developing better monitoring we have been able to identify common themes. We share this valuable knowledge within our team and with relevant teams/services to enhance our expertise in understanding and meeting the needs of children.

We have engaged children and young people in providing feedback on our performance, including both areas of strength and areas for improvement – see feedback section below.

## **Priority 3: We will be ambitious for Our Children**

The IRO service has collaborated with social work colleagues to define and promote high-quality care plans, with a focus on achieving permanence from the outset of a child's journey in care. This has been accomplished through targeted workshops, dedicated IRO links with specific teams, and engagement in service-wide meetings.

We have continued to prioritise increasing face-to-face visits with children to strengthen relationships and we have continued to offer children and young people the opportunity to chair/co-chair their reviews to help promote meaningful engagement. While the transition to a new data system temporarily impacted on the availability of information on the number of reviews chaired or co-chaired by children and young people for this reporting period, proactive measure have been implemented to ensure this data is accurately captured in the next annual report.

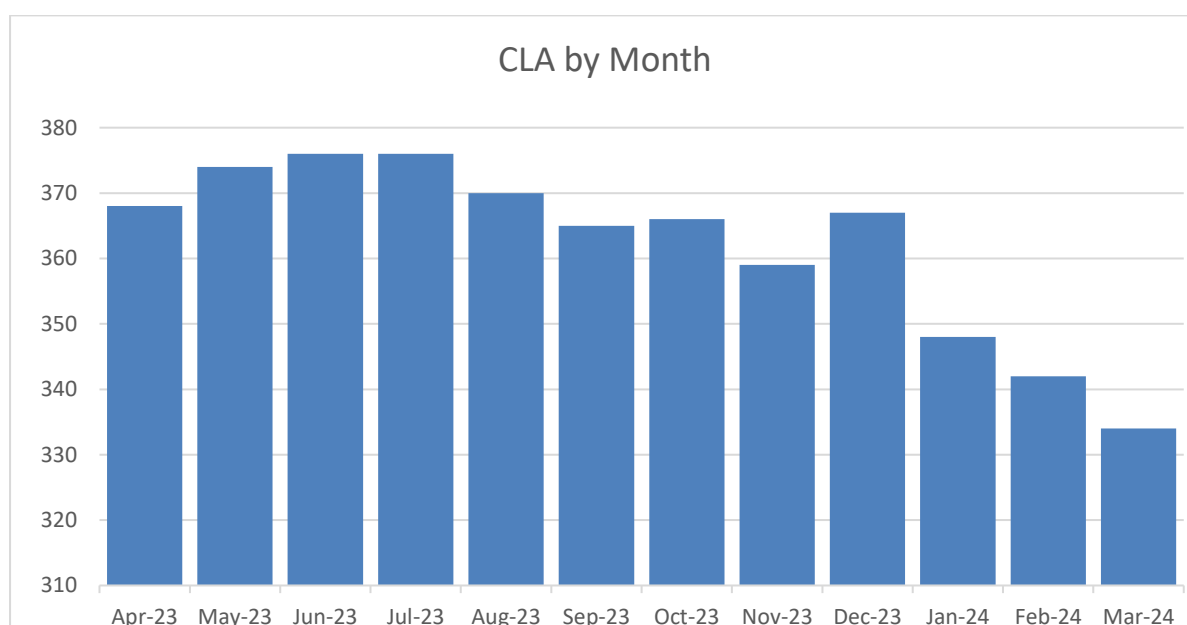
We have collaborated with our Islington Partners in Practice to review the IRO Practice Standards and CLA Practice Guidance. It has been felt that these provide appropriate focus on early permanence for children.

Over the course of the year, we have further enhanced and strengthened the connections between the IRO Service Manager and IROs with other service areas through regular collaboration, increasing visibility at service meetings.

Additionally, we have supported the Health & Wellbeing Champion in identifying strategic themes and challenges impacting our Children Looked After. This includes engaging young people in care or with care experience to share their perspectives and collaborating with our CLA Health colleagues to develop interview questions that capture meaningful insights and experiences.

## Children Looked After Reviews April 2023 – March 2024

The data indicates a decrease in the number of Children Looked After during the 2023/24 reporting period, from 368 in April 2023 to 334 in March 2024. This reduction reflects the positive impact of Early Help and frontline services in providing effective support, thereby reducing the necessity for children and young people to enter care.



The IRO Handbook suggests that each IRO has a caseload between 50-70 children. The current average caseload within Haringey for the reporting year was 56 children. The IROs are committed to responding swiftly and effectively to the changing needs of our young people, ensuring that each child receives the focused attention and support they require. This provides the ability to offer a higher number of reviews, reflecting the IRO service's proactive approach in adapting to evolving circumstances and working to achieve the best outcomes for every child in our care. These reviews are conducted when there have been unplanned placement changes, significant changes in educational, health, or contact needs, or when more frequent reviews are deemed beneficial for the young person.

13 children left care before their first review, while 12 children and young people were reunified with their families by their second review. This highlights the effective work of practitioners and the HART service in supporting reunification efforts.



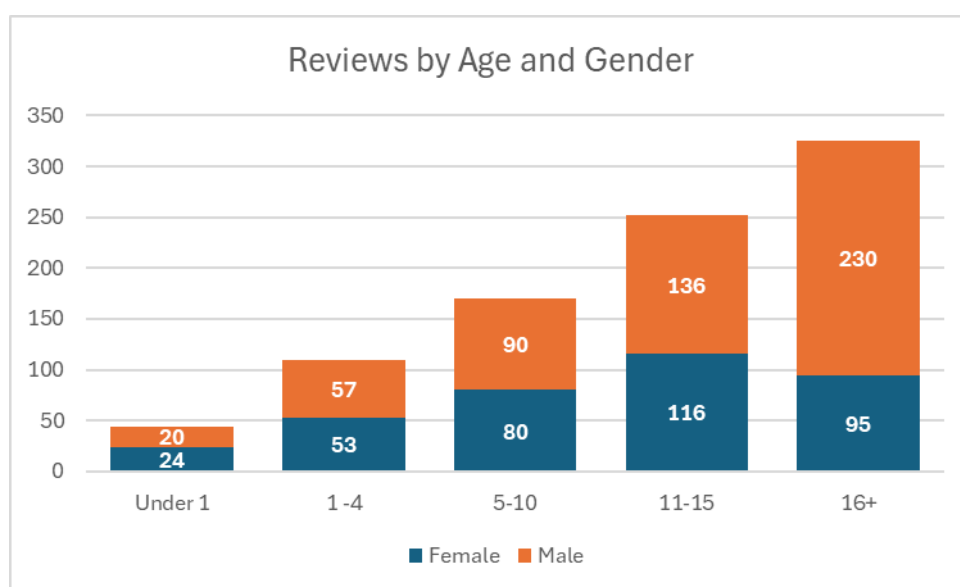
Additionally, IROs actively participate in decision-making forums where their expertise and knowledge of the child/young person, contribute to the development of optimal care plans and outcomes.

In Haringey, we are committed to providing children and young people in care with a consistent, supportive IRO from start to finish, offering continuity and trust. If a young person returns to care, we make every effort to reconnect them with their previous IRO. Sibling groups also stay with the same IRO for a unified experience. To ensure fairness, if both a parent and child are in care, we assign separate IROs, ensuring focus on the needs of each individual child.

The IRO service works closely with the CPA (Child Protection Advisors) team to ensure a smooth transition when a child or young person on a child protection plan enters care, addressing their safeguarding needs seamlessly. Additionally, when young people are subject to both child protection and care plans, IROs and Child Protection Advisors collaborate to minimise any overlap, ensuring a coordinated and efficient approach to supporting the child's wellbeing and safety.

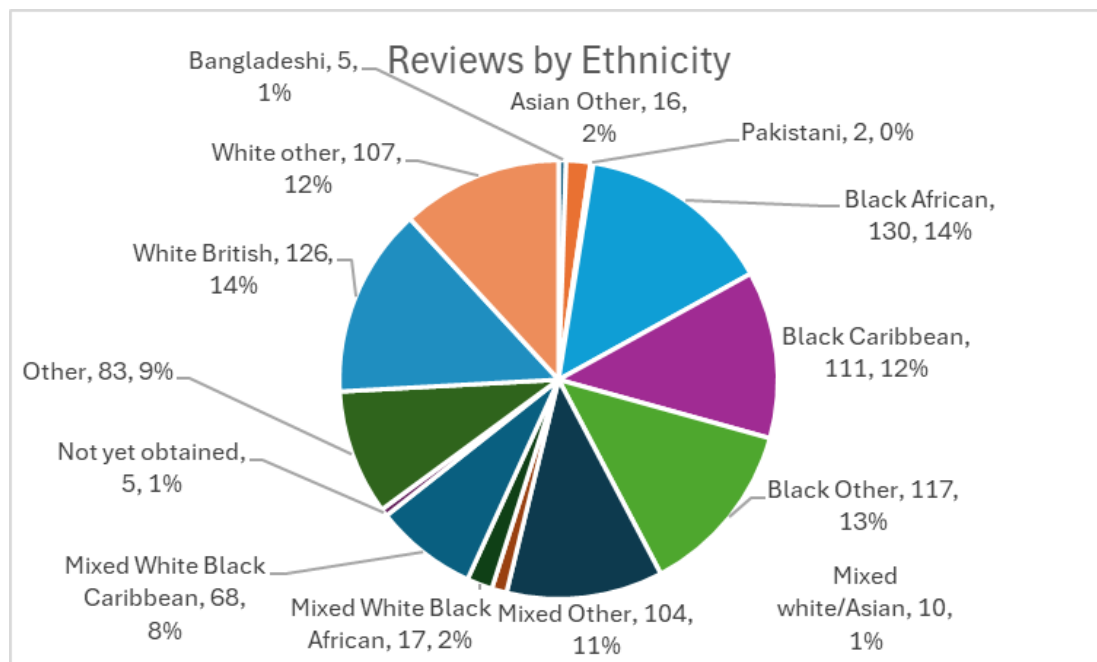
## Looked After population during 2023/24

901 children in care reviews were held this year. The data shows that we continued to have more boys than girls in our care, with 59% (533) of reviews conducted for males in the 2023-2024 period, reflecting a small increase from 57% in the previous year. Additionally, 67% of the children and young people in our care during this period were aged 11 or older, marking a slight rise from 62% in the previous year.



The demographic breakdown of children and young people in care in Haringey reflects a rich diversity, with 26% recorded as white, 39% as Black, 23% as having mixed heritage, 3% as Asian, and 9% identifying with other ethnicities. These figures are consistent with those from the previous year. In comparison, 68.1% of Haringey's population is made up of non-white British ethnic groups, with 9.4% Black African and 6.2% Black Caribbean (Census 2021).

While the IRO service recognises the overrepresentation of Black children and young people within the children in care population, it also acknowledges the greater challenges that come with supporting these children and families. This highlights the importance of continuing to address systemic and socio-economic factors that can contribute to this disparity. The IRO service is committed to providing tailored support and advocacy to ensure that all children in care, regardless of their ethnic background, have access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.



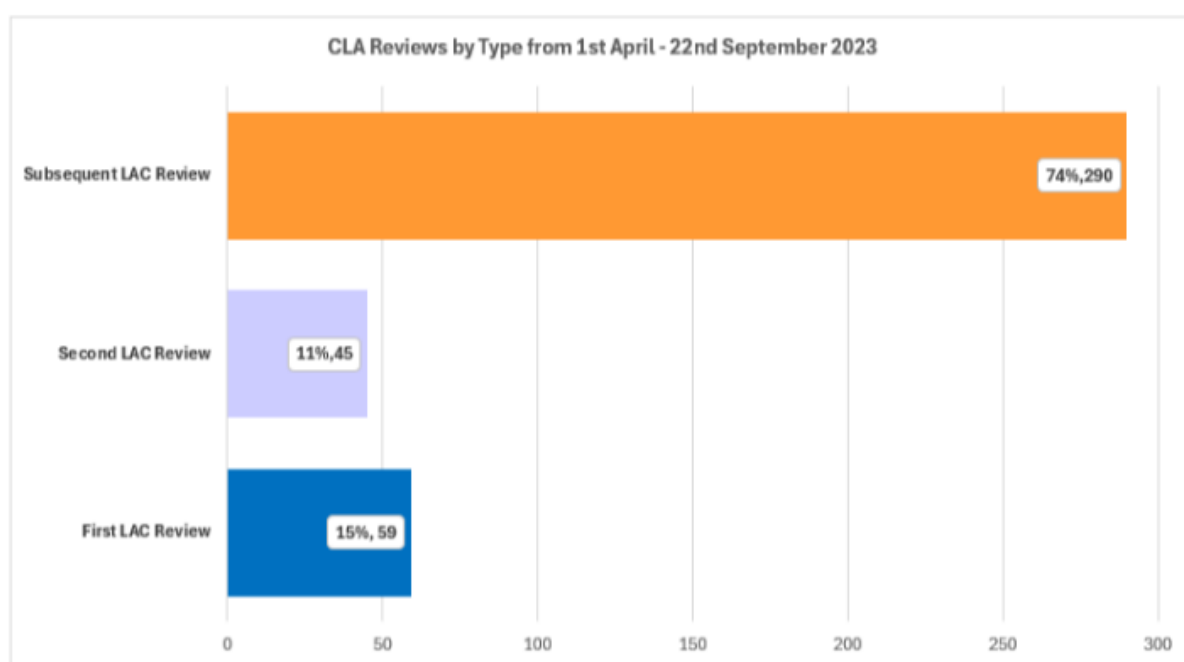
## Reviewing Performance

### Number and Type of Children in Care Reviews

The Child Looked After (CLA) review is a flexible process that is tailored to each individual child/young person and may vary in its format. It can be a standalone meeting where all relevant individuals in the child's life participate, or it may involve multiple meetings, with a central meeting attended by the IRO, the child, the social worker, and key adults in the child's life.

IROs assess the specific needs of each child and make decisions on how to conduct the CLA review in a manner that best suits the circumstances of the child, ensuring their wishes and feelings are heard. The role of the IRO involves striking a balance and ensuring that the review is child-centred, considering all aspects of the child's care plan, even if some of those aspects may be uncomfortable for the child/young person. Whenever appropriate, IROs encourage and facilitate the participation of children and young people in taking a leading role by chairing or managing part of their review meetings, empowering them to have greater ownership and voice in the process.

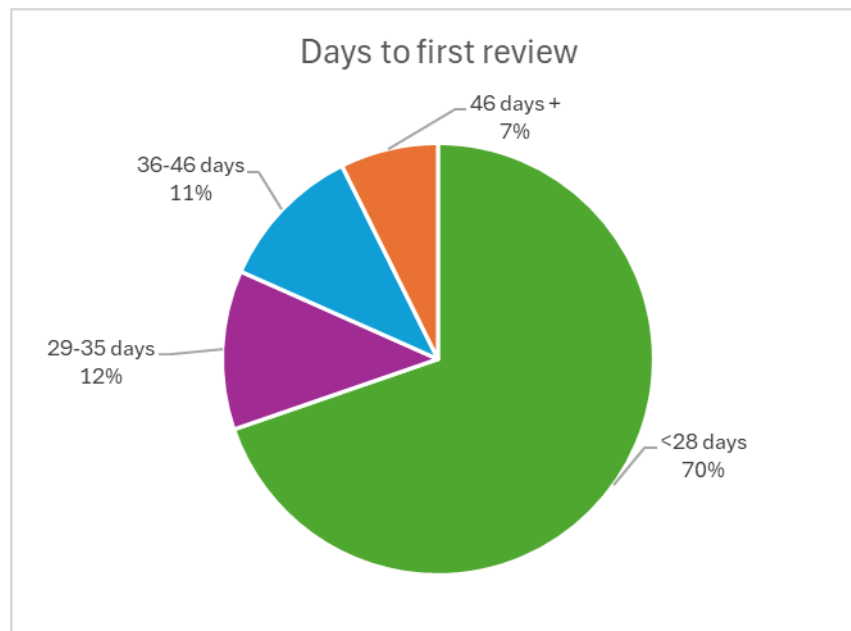
For the period March-September 2023 the chart provided below illustrates the frequency of subsequent reviews, particularly for children and young people who have been in care for at least 10 months. It is important to note that the number of reviews conducted does not directly represent the number of children in care, but rather indicates the frequency with which reviews have been deemed necessary.



### Timeliness of Initial Children Looked After Reviews

The IRO Service remains committed to ensuring Child Looked After (CLA) reviews are completed in a timely manner. Through inductions with new staff, reflective discussions with practitioners and quarterly attendance at respective service meetings, efforts have been ongoing to ensure that the Local Authority consistently presents an updated Care Plan/Pathway Plan and Social Worker report for each CLA review. Children and young people, are allocated an IRO within 48 hours of notification that they have become looked after.

During the 2023/24 period, 70% (631) of initial CLA reviews were held on time. There was a dip in performance due to the implementation of the new LCS system requiring the adaption of practitioners to new recording processes. There has been significant progress in meeting initial review timescales since April 2024, reflecting the successful integration of LCS into everyday practice.



## Midway Reviews

Midway reviews have remained a key focus for the IRO service, offering a valuable opportunity to connect with practitioners and assess progress of children's plans. These reviews play a crucial role in identifying any emerging challenges within the child's system, allowing the IRO to provide support in addressing issues and ensuring timely resolution.

Month	Forms
April	23
May	35
June	44
July	41
August	45
September	2
October	26
November	11
December	18
January	49
February	36
March	10
Total	<b>340</b>

IROs have been proactively recording midway reviews using the designated forms, with a strong commitment to maintaining oversight. While September 2023 saw a temporary dip in midway reviews and IRO oversight, due to the data migration process, the IRO service quickly responded by working closely with teams to ensure completion.

In January 2024, the IRO Practice Standards were updated to further strengthen this focus, now incorporating specific standards around midway reviews.

## **Children and young people's participation in reviews**

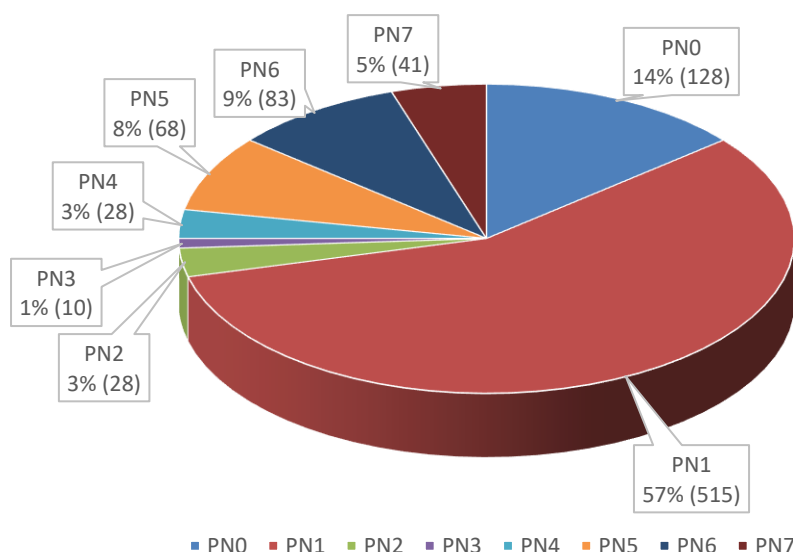
During the past year, the IRO service has continued to hold most CLA reviews in-person, or as hybrid reviews; a blend of both in-person and virtual attendance. However, there have been instances where virtual review meetings were still necessary or requested by the young person. The Child Centred Practice Guidance for Child Looked After reviews prioritise the voice of the child, and various methods have been employed to facilitate their participation. IROs have utilised video conference calls, phone calls, social media applications, and face-to-face visits to engage with children and young people. As part of the reviews, IROs and young people have the option of a range of activities such as cooking, drawing, and sharing prepared poems, contributing to increased attendance and participation of children and young people in the process.

Based on the data available for the year ending on March 31, 2024, 95% (732) of children and young people aged over 4 years participated in their Reviews, an increase from 91% the previous year. Participation may involve attending the review meeting, contributing to discussions, providing input directly to the IRO or another trusted adult, completing consultation documents, or having their views represented through advocates. Among the reviews held, 14% (128) involved children under the age of four, where the IROs rely on physical observations and information about routines and relationships to understand the child's perspective. For the remaining young people, 57% (515) attended their reviews and spoke for themselves which is unchanged from the previous year. Additionally, 11% (96) of young people attended or were absent but had their views represented through an advocate, mirroring the previous year. 5% (41) of young people did not attend their review, and their views were not presented, a slight increase from the previous year's 2%. 10% (93) of children and young people represented their views either through methods, such as text messaging, or through the use of symbols. 3% (28) of children and young people physically attended their meeting but did not comment in the review.

A significant proportion of the 5% (41) of young people who did not attend their reviews, some are missing and experiencing social and emotional challenges often associated with past experiences.

To maintain contact with these vulnerable young people, our dedicated Exploitation Team conducts Return Home Interviews when they are reported missing. These interviews play a crucial role in re-establishing communication and promote safety. Despite the challenges presented by these circumstances, IROs are unwavering in their efforts to stay connected with this group, ensuring they continue to be supported. However, it is important to note that many of these young people frequently change their contact details when they go missing, which can make it increasingly difficult to maintain consistent communication.

## Children's Participation in Reviews



Code	Definition
PN0	Child aged under 4 at time of Review
PN1	Child/young person physically attends and speaks for him or herself
PN2	Child/young person physically attends, and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf
PN3	Child/young person attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally)
PN4	Child/young person physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her views symbolically and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her
PN5	Child/young person does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her
PN6	Child/YP does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the Review by a facilitative medium
PN7	Child/young person does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed in any way to Review

IROs are deeply committed to ensuring that young people with additional or complex needs have every opportunity to communicate effectively, using methods that best suit their individual needs. For those whose communication is not verbal, IROs actively explore a range of alternative communication methods, including eye gaze technology, communication boards, PECS, speech-generating devices, and other augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools. This personalised approach ensures that every child has a voice in their care planning and review process.

The IRO service has made significant progress in supporting children and young people with complex communication needs, and enhancing our expertise in this area remains a priority for 2024/25. We are committed to developing tailored strategies and skills to better support non-verbal communication in children, ensuring their active participation in reviews and that their needs are met with the utmost care. By continuing to invest in this vital area, we aim to further strengthen our ability

to empower every child to communicate their thoughts, wishes, and feelings, ensuring their voices are heard throughout their journey in care.

## **Quality assuring the work of the IRO service**

The IRO Service Manager holds the responsibility for ensuring the effectiveness of the IRO Service as outlined in the IRO Handbook guidance. The IRO Service is committed to consistently improving the quality of its services. The IROs' performance in chairing Children Looked After (CLA) reviews has been observed by the Director of Children's Services. CLA reviews have been observed by the IRO Service Manager between January and March 2024 – this was a very positive learning experience which exemplified the positive relationships that IROs have developed with the young people they work with, and feedback has been provided using the Quality Assurance Observation Tool.

Feedback forms are distributed to children/young people, foster carers, social workers, supervising social workers, and parents as part of the CLA review invitation pack. Currently, the feedback forms are in paper format. In recognition of this the IROs are undertaking an exercise between April-June 2024 asking young people what their preferred method of feedback would be which will assist in developing better feedback systems.

Recognising the importance of gathering meaningful feedback the IROs have taken proactive steps to encourage young people, carers, key workers and parents to complete feedback forms or engage directly with the participation officer.

All the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed positively to the feedback questions.

Analysis of this feedback indicates that children and young people feel included and have the opportunity to discuss what matters to them. IROs effectively explain the reasons behind decisions, and overall, young people are satisfied with the outcomes of their reviews.

2023-2024 has been another very positive year for feedback in respect of IROs and the review process. Some of the detailed feedback about the IRO Service is detailed below:

## Feedback from CLA Review Participants:

...so great to meet him in person and hear someone so invested in his role and supporting T. I'm sure everyone knows this but he is an asset to the profession and your local authority. **Head Teacher**

There was a relaxed atmosphere which was very conducive to gaining positive outcomes

**Professional**

There is nothing that would change (about the review)–

**Young Person**

**It was my first CLA review as a SW. S was very supportive as a professional and that made things easy for me.**

**Social worker**

She completed the review in a calm and informative manner ensuring the YP was involved throughout. Excellent review meeting.

I am happy the way that everything is going well **Young Person**

The communication was great. I was able to speak freely about my opinions **Carer**

Good pace and everything explained with actions for both social worker and key worker with timescales clearly set out **Carer**

Very friendly and open discussions were welcomed. It was a lovely opportunity to share the progress

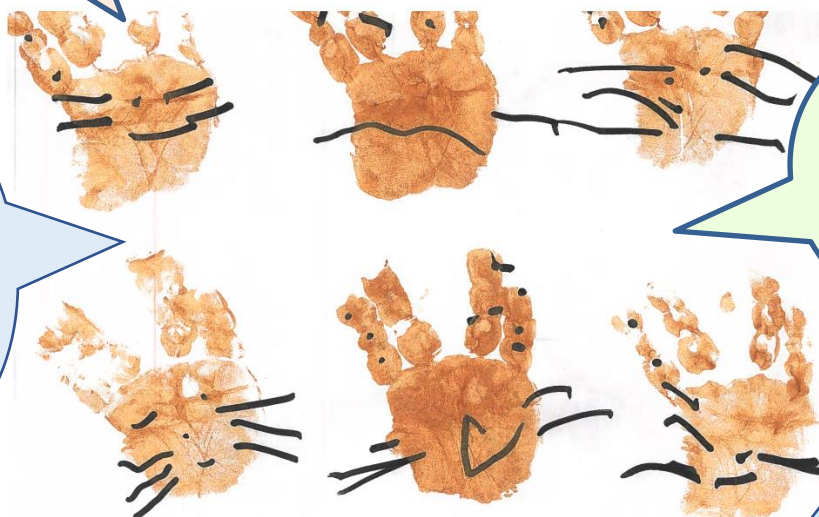
**Parent**

The (IRO) did an excellent job in making sure needs of the child were clearly stated

**Social Worker**

It was a lovely meeting and it was so nice to hear the progress in F since being adopted

**Parent**



**Art work by Young Person**



The positive feedback received emphasises several strengths of the service. Review participants highly appreciate the skills of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in effectively chairing complex meetings with a focus on the well-being of children, promoting child-friendly environments, and encouraging participation from all attendees. No negative feedback has been received so far.

The IROs' strong working relationships and engagement with young people, as well as the support they provide in their role, are highly valued not only within the local authority but also by external partners. Their extensive knowledge and passion for the well-being of young people are evident in their participation in various panels and professional meetings. This dedication has been recognised and praised by all levels of the management group, making them a consistent and reliable professional for most of the Children Looked After in the area.

All service areas were invited to provide feedback to look at how the IROs are perceived and to help consider additional areas of support and development. Here are a few of the responses received:

Just letting you know that I met with my management team and received really good feedback about the IRO. They feedback that she is attentive, holds others to account and responsive to escalations. – **Youth Justice**

It has been a pleasure working with the IROs at Haringey. I have observed dedication, passion and care for the children and young people...If I were to sum up the work of the IROs in Haringey I would say dedication, and it is brilliant that our young people and children have a team that challenges services to secure the best outcomes for our children and young people. – **Virtual School**

Overall the IROs are strong advocates for the children and young people, I find it helpful that when care plans are not progressed this is communicated to me and the managers and we are able to address this with the SW. Having a consistent team has been helpful for the children and YP and when there is a SW change the information we can gain from the IRO is valuable. I have noted qualities for each of them, from my perspective. All work well in partnership and have effective communication skills. – **Service Manager**

In addition to their role in providing challenge, the IROs have also provided numerous compliments and commendations for the excellent practice observed in Haringey. These positive remarks are shared with the practitioners, Team Manager, Service Manager, Heads of Service, Assistant Director, and Principal Social Worker.

According to the IRO Handbook, it is the responsibility of the IRO Service Manager to ensure that the IROs receive direct support to fulfil their duties. This support includes managing their workload and enabling them to effectively challenge the Local Authority. The IRO Service Manager provides monthly supervision to the IROs, offering professional advice on individual cases when needed, which is documented in supervision notes. Additionally, IROs can consult with the IRO Service Manager informally and on an ad-hoc basis as required. Monthly group supervision meetings are also conducted, providing a safe space to address dilemmas and discuss value-based, practice, and ethical challenges associated with the role.

## SEND Inspection

Following the success of the Ofsted inspection of Haringey CYPS Services in February 2023 following which Haringey was awarded the rating of Good overall we are proud to have contributed to the great outcome of the Area Send inspection of Haringey Local Area Partnership in February 2024.

As part of their findings, they recognised that:

- 'Professionals across the partnership work creatively to address the rising numbers of children and young people with SEND'
- 'The voice of the child or young person rings very clearly through EHC [Education, Health and Care] plans'
- 'Children and young people with SEND do well at school' and 'benefit from a broad and developing range of out-of-school activities'
- 'Knowledgeable, culturally sensitive professionals offer direct support to families'
- 'Leaders have used creative commissioning to reduce waiting times across the partnership'

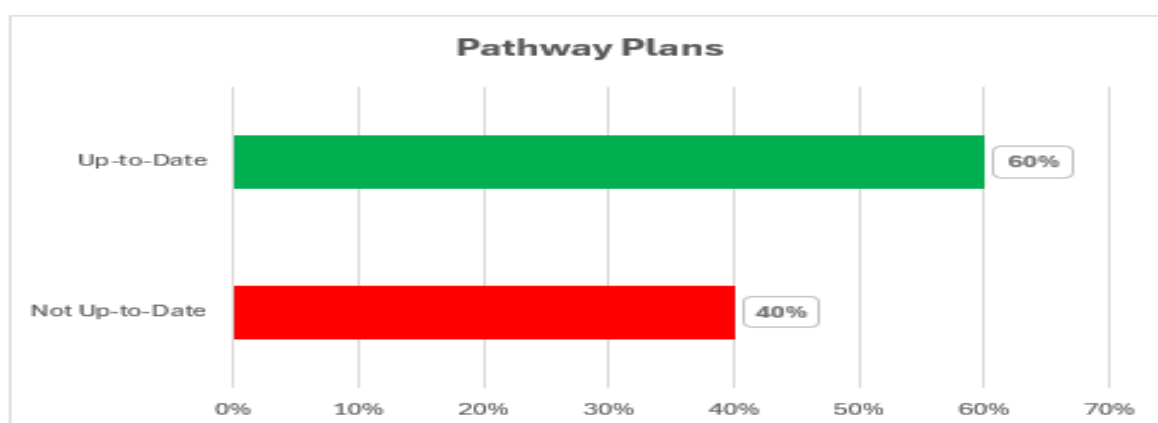
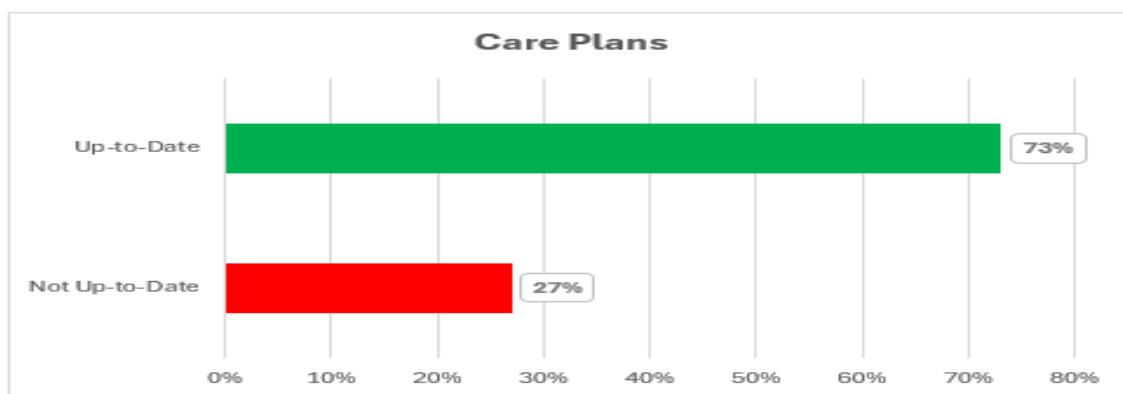
IROs have been working with children who have an EHCP and are placed both in and out of borough which requires a collaborative and child-centred approach that takes into account the child's individual needs and circumstances. IROs can play a key role in ensuring that the child's needs are being met and that any challenges are identified and addressed.

As at March 2024, 99 Children Looked After (CLA) under the age of 16 in Haringey have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), with 68 residing outside the local authority. Additionally, 24 young people aged 16 and over have an EHCP, with 11 of them living out of borough, making up approximately a third of all our CLA. These young people are placed across 29 different local authorities, which presents IROs with additional considerations, including:

- Involving the child and their family
- Establishing relationships with professionals in the new area
- Advocating for the child
- Being aware of local resources
- Collaborating with the placing authority

## Care Planning

The main responsibility of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) is to ensure the quality and effectiveness of the care planning and review process, for every child or young person in the care of the Local Authority. They prioritise considering the current wishes and feelings of each child or young person. The IROs are responsible for ensuring that the care plan accurately reflects the child or young person's present needs, and that the actions outlined in the plan align with the legal obligations of the Local Authority towards them.



There was a decrease in the number of up-to-date Care Plans and Pathway Plans compared to the same period in the previous year. This decrease in completion rates was mainly due to the way data was collated in LCS. Since April 2024, the data capture method in LCS has been changed to provide a more accurate reflection, leading to a marked improvement in Plan completion rates.

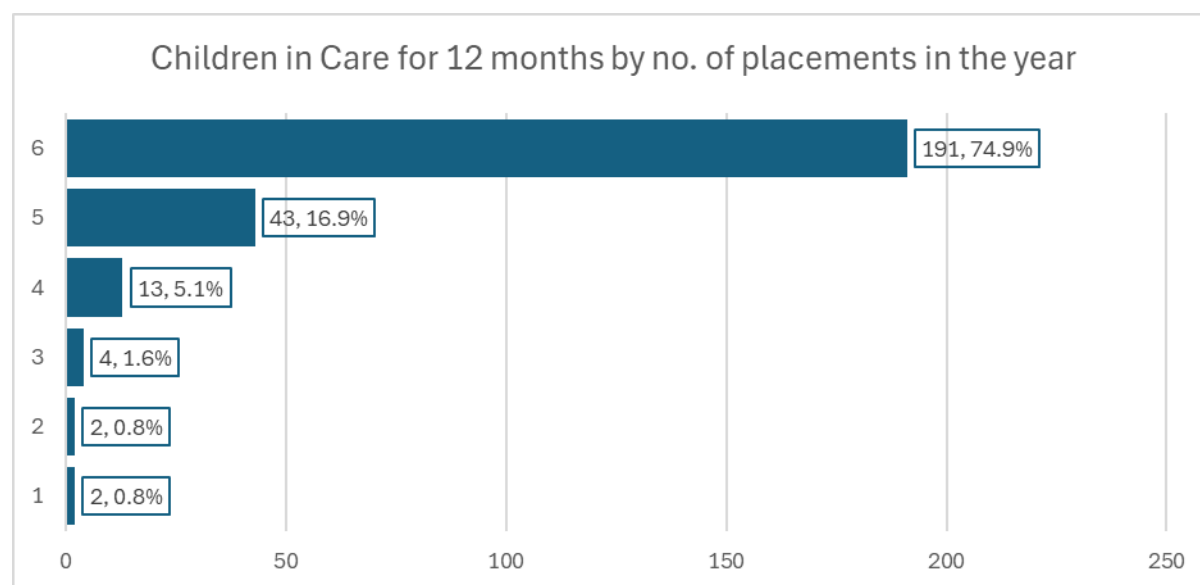
The IRO Service has conducted workshops to support practitioners in enhancing the quality of information in Social Worker reports for reviews. These workshops aimed to promote children's voices and views, and ensure their cultural, religious, and language needs are met.

## Stability

Most young people in our care, accounting for 75% (191), have enjoyed stability in their living arrangements and the quality of care provided. This represents an increase from 69% the previous year. Among our young people, 17% (43) experienced a single change in their living situation, primarily due to initially being placed in emergency foster homes before transitioning to more long-term placements; another improvement from 22% in 2022/23. The percentage of young people at 8% (21), who experienced more than one move has also decreased this year; this downward trend is positive. The primary reasons for multiple moves continue to be challenges related to youth violence, criminal exploitation, and trauma-related behaviours.

It is worth noting that 75% (191) of children and young people have resided in their homes for longer than 2.5 years, higher than the national and statistical neighbour's average. The "Staying Put" arrangement has seen a 12% decrease, falling to 26% (28) this year corresponding in an increase in the number of young people opting to move to supported living arrangements.

In reviewing the data, it becomes evident that the young people who have experienced three or more moves are particularly vulnerable. These children may be victims of modern slavery, subjected to criminal exploitation, or have endured significant trauma. In response to this, the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) work together with social workers, the exploitation service, and other relevant professionals. Their objective is to ensure that the safety plans for this vulnerable group are effective and to minimise the necessity for further placement changes.



To help promote stability IROs are:

- Mindful in ensuring that children are accessing the support identified within EHCPs and that this support remains appropriate particularly for those children who have emotional and behavioural needs.
- Making recommendations for young people to be referred to CAMHS and/or for social workers to arrange consultation meetings with First Step where young people have complex histories, have experienced significant trauma or where SDQs reflect a need to do so.
- Contributing to the Placement Stability Panel.
- Involving Supervising Social Workers more effectively and raising challenge where appropriate to do so.

## Placement Stability Panel

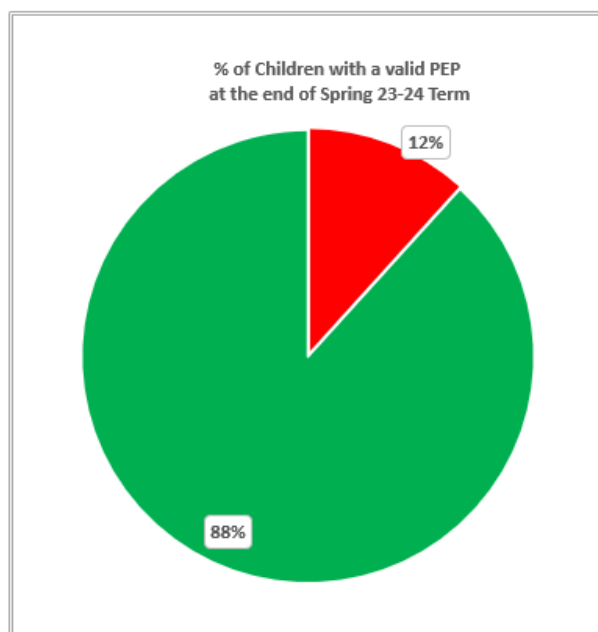
The Placement Stability Panel (PSP) was established on May 1, 2020. The Service Managers for Quality Assurance and Looked After Children's Service initiated the creation of this panel. Initially, its purpose was to assist the operational teams in promoting placement stability for Children in Care via Haringey Children's Services. The aim was to minimise disruptions to the young person's placement, education, and health, while prioritising their safety.

Additionally, it aims to review the situations of children who have experienced two or more placements throughout the year. The Head of Service for the Children Looked After service chairs the panel, with the CLA Service Manager or IRO Service Manager serving as chair in their absence.

## Education and Health of Children Looked After

IROs review education and health care planning processes as part of the CLA Review process and monitor weekly key performance indicators. Personal Education Plans (PEP's) and Health Assessments feed into the review process to ensure our children in care are achieving their best.

### Personal Education Plans



At the end of the Spring Term, March 2024, 88% (294) of our Children Looked After had an up-to-date Personal Education Plan. Whilst the completion rates have remained high, we need to ensure that the PEPs reflect children's educational histories and where appropriate, careers advice and aspirations.

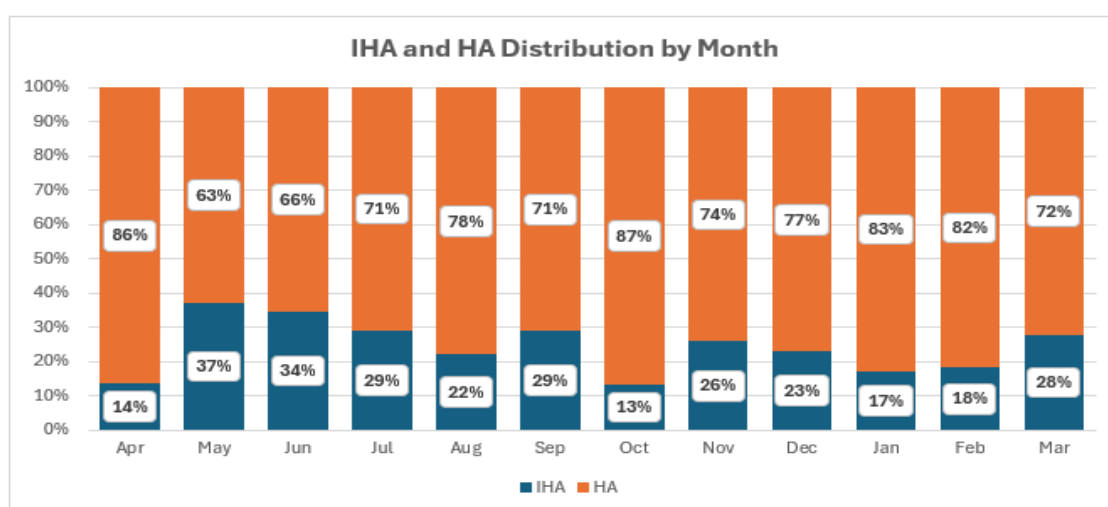
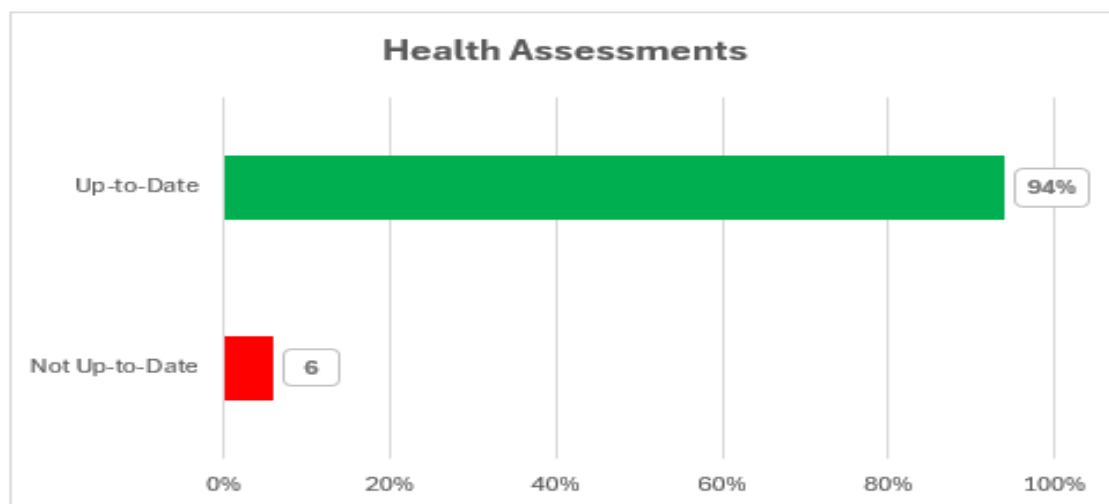
To ensure continuity between Social Care, Education and Health, the IRO service works in close partnership with the Health, Virtual School and SEN services to optimise positive outcomes for children in care.

Plans are underway for more collaborative work with the Virtual School and other service areas to help continue the improvement in PEP completion rates and to enhance the quality of information.

### Health

Every young person in care should have an annual health assessment. In 2023-2024, 94% health assessments had been completed which is above the national average of 90%. We encourage children and young people remaining registered with their GP to help promote continuity of care. We have made good progress in overcoming the challenges around children accessing dental care and IROs remain vigilant and responsive to the emotional and mental health wellbeing of our CLA by encouraging access to local CAMHS or seeking consultations through First Step or First Step Plus interventions offered via the Tavistock and Portman Clinic. We continue to work with some young people who may not yet be convinced that a health assessment is a priority to ensure that their health needs are met which could be attributable to a background in which their medical needs have been neglected.

Looking ahead to 24/25 we aim to ensure support to improve the completion rates of initial health assessments for young people entering care. This can be achieved by seeking formal consent for assessments to be completed at an earlier stage in the process and promptly updating the care status on LCS.



## Permanency

The Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) place great emphasis on advocating for children to have a secure, stable, and nurturing family that can support them throughout their childhood and beyond.

During the 2023-24 period progress has been made in advancing permanency options for children in our care. Long-term placements, children and young people who have enjoyed the same home for 2.5+ years, has remained consistently high at 71%. This performance surpasses both our statistical neighbours and the national average in England.

In addition to actively considering proposed permanency plans by the second Children Looked After review, the IROs play an active role in the Permanency Tracking Panel, which is chaired by the Head of Service for Children Looked After, as well as the ADM (Agency Decision-Making) forum, chaired by

the Assistant Director. The IRO Service Manager consistently attends both the Permanency Tracking Panel and ADMs to convey the views of the IROs and represent the voice of the child. As of March 2024, we have successfully matched 25 young people with their long-term foster parents, a further increase with 35% of our YP in foster care are long term matched . Furthermore, there have been 13 Special Guardianship Orders, an increase from the previous year and 7 Adoption Orders granted this year, 2023-24, 5% higher than 2022/23.

Permanency planning continues to be a focus for the local authority and the Permanency Tracking panel has been enhanced to ensure monitoring and tracking of key performance indicators and permanency.

The IRO service recognises that further improvements can be made to help achieve permanency earlier for our children and young people. To help improve in this area IROs have:

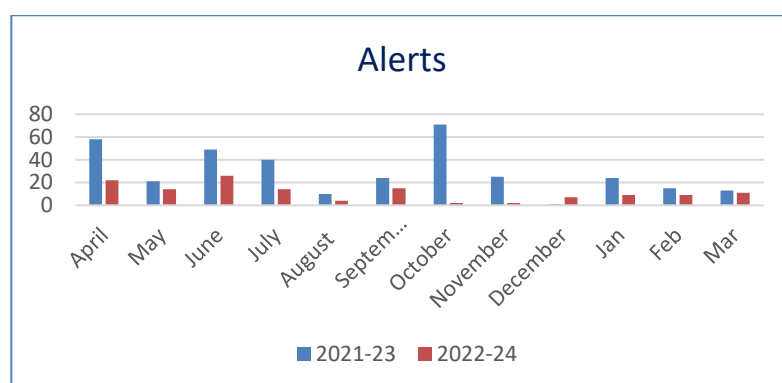
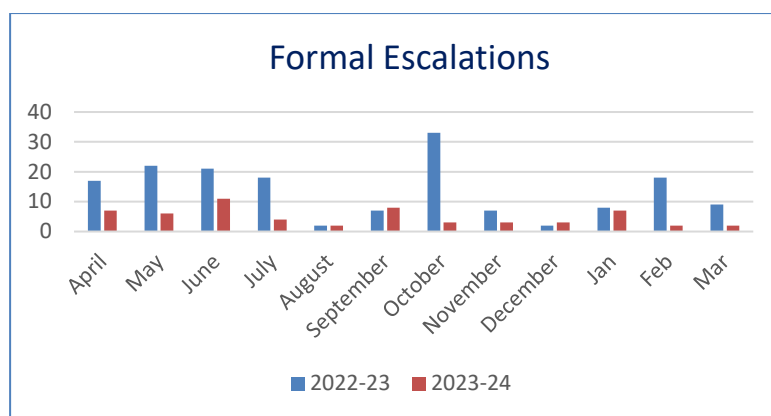
- Continued to embed the use of midway reviews to help monitor progression of permanency and pick up on patterns of instability and address the cause - for example Haringey CAMHS has no priority system in place for CLA and some Local Authority systems are causing delays for CLA with EHCP plans, or Independent Fostering Agencies not delivering on therapeutic support as per the contract.
- Increased vigilance of there being evidence of permanence decisions making reflected on case files.
- Collating data for young people at 16+ matched in their CLA reviews

## **Dispute Resolutions 2023/24**

The IRO Handbook emphasises the vital role of the Dispute Resolution process in Haringey, particularly in addressing challenges that arise from the care planning process for our children. A well-established process is in place that both IROs and Social Work teams understand. IROs proactively seek to manage issues arising through effective communication. If matters remain unresolved, IROs advance through the Dispute Resolution stages if resolution isn't achieved. This escalation path includes Team Managers, Services Managers, Heads of Service, Assistant Director, Director, and CAFCASS.

IROs collaborate with colleagues across Social Work teams to resolve issues whenever possible swiftly and informally. If a timely response is lacking or resolution remains unattainable, the matter will progress through the six-stage process. The overarching goal is to ensure that issues are consistently resolved within a 20-working-day timeframe, aligning with the statutory guidance outlined in the IRO Handbook.

In Haringey there has been a significant decrease in both alerts and formal escalations over the past year as per the tables below:



During the period from April to March 2024, the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) was utilised a total of 193 times, comprising 135 informal alerts and 58 formal escalations. Comparing this with the same period in 2022-2023, there has been a decrease of 62% in the initiation of the dispute resolution process.

Following feedback from the Ofsted inspection in February/March 2023 the IRO service has reviewed its use of the Dispute Resolution Policy to help ensure that its use is more impactful. This had led to IROs having more conversations and discussions with social workers, team managers and service managers which has helped avoid the need to use the DRP. We have found that quite often there is no dispute as such, between the IRO and operational teams, but discussions have helped progress matters for our children in care. IROs have recorded such discussions in activity case notes.

The Liquid Logic data system (LCS) was introduced in October 2023. As with the introduction of any new systems there have been initial challenges which coincides with the reduction of uses of the DRP from October 2023. The IRO Service Manager continues to work closely with the Performance Team and IROs to help improve the accuracy of the data around the use of the DRP and other areas identified.

With the introduction of LCS processes for Children Looked After, the IRO Service has implemented a strict policy of not proceeding with a Child Looked After review if the Social Work report is unavailable. This has led to a significant reduction in the number of alerts and escalations in this area. However, it remains the most frequent reason for using the DRP, as it affects review meeting arrangements.

The top five reasons for use of the DRP in the period April 23 -March 2024 are:





The IRO Service acknowledges the pivotal role of the DRP in avoiding/reducing drift and delays for children looked after. Simultaneously, IROs recognise the significance of nurturing working relationships and their impact on CLA outcomes. Balancing their role as critical friends, the IROs have continued to find that direct communication with social workers, team managers, or service managers often leads to issue resolution without resorting to the DRP.

Regarding Personal Education Plans (PEPs), the IRO Service maintains close collaboration with the Head of Virtual School. Their joint efforts have helped to expedite PEP completion for both social care and schools resulting in positive completion numbers.

## External Challenge

As part of the Ofsted improvement plan the IRO Service introduced new ways in which IROs can record and evidence greater triangulation and scrutiny of care planning for our Children Looked After.

IRO's current data shows that between October 23-March 2024 there are 19 records where IROs have liaised and communicated with external partners to help progress care plans and ensure the child's needs are being met or assessed. IROs have been able to help progress matters such as children accessing Education & Health Care Plans, supporting progress in transferring EHPCs, accessing Occupational Therapy assessments, liaising with SEN departments in other Local Authorities to ensure our children access the right educational provision, and challenging the use of restraint.

There have been three formal challenges of external partners during the same period relating to progressing a young person's access to therapeutic support, and a young person's access to the right educational provision. These were resolved.

## Developing IRO Challenge and Oversight

There has been noticeable progress in effectively utilising the DRP process and applying appropriate reasoning at the relevant stages. However, there is still room for improvement to enhance outcomes and ensure timely responses to escalations. The IRO service acknowledges that the DRP is not the only solution for resolving issues affecting young people. Therefore, the service has undertaken various initiatives, including:

- Monitoring children placed with their parents and ensure that they are reviewed in a timely way
- Collaborating with CLA health to improve young people's access to health services.
- Working closely with the Head of Virtual School enabling young people to receive the prompt necessary support they require.
- Reaffirming links between each IRO and a specific service, with IROs attending service/team meetings at least once per quarter to share observations and seek feedback.
- Increasing the number of midway reviews and monitoring activities between CLA reviews.
- Participating in monthly Permanency Tracker Panels, Placement Stability Panels, and contributing to ADMs (decision-making forums).
- Engaging in discussions with social workers, team managers, and senior managers to seek prompt resolution of issues.

These measures are aimed at fostering improved communication, collaboration, and resolution within the system to better serve the needs of young people.

## Impact of IROs upon Outcomes for Children Looked After

IROs have actively supported practitioners in achieving significant positive outcomes for children in our care. Together, we have celebrated several notable achievements, including:

## Education, Employment & Training

The IROs, in collaboration with the Virtual School, play a crucial role in ensuring that our young people in care receive the necessary support to thrive and reach their full potential. Through the CLA Review process, we take proactive measures to provide them with the tools and resources they need to excel. We take great pride in sharing some remarkable achievements of our young people in Haringey:

- **University Enrollments:** We are delighted to share that 42 former Children Looked After from Haringey are currently enrolled in universities, embarking on higher education journeys to pursue their aspirations.
- **Breaking Barriers:** Among these exceptional individuals, four young adults are studying Law, with one attending Cambridge University. Additionally, we have a talented young adult at Oxford University, studying Modern Languages & Linguistics.
- **Graduations:** 14 of our young people are expected to successfully complete their studies and graduate this year, including those attending Oxford and Cambridge. A further nine are expected to graduate in 2025.
- **Education, Employment, or Training:** In the 19-21-year-old age group, 55% (128) of our young adults are in Education, Employment, or Training, in line with both national benchmarks and our statistical neighbours. This performance reflects the positive impact of our collective efforts in ensuring their successful transition into adulthood.

These accomplishments highlight our commitment to providing comprehensive support and guidance to our young people, empowering them to pursue their aspirations and succeed in their chosen paths. We remain dedicated to continuing our efforts in promoting educational attainment, employability, and personal development for all children and young people in our care.

## Stability, Managing Money & Independence

The IROs prioritise transition planning to adulthood as an integral part of their reviews, initiating the process as early as 14 years old for young people with Education & Health Care Plans. By closely monitoring and encouraging preparatory work focused on independence, we have successfully supported numerous young individuals in securing permanent tenancies. Notably, 76 young people have moved into their own one-bedroom flats, while 6 young parents with babies have been provided two-bedroom flats. Additionally, there have been 4 reciprocal arrangements with other local authorities, allowing these young people to maintain stability in their geographical areas and thus maintaining important established local relationships.

To further assist young people in managing their finances and maintaining their tenancies, we have implemented the Money House program. This programme provides practical guidance on financial management, digital skills, and budgeting, enabling young individuals in or entering independent housing to pay their rent promptly, handle bills, and effectively manage their finances. This immersive program, set within a flat environment, empowers young people to make informed choices about their future and prevent homelessness. This year, a total of 27 young individuals successfully completed the Money House program, with most participants rating the trainer and program as 'Excellent' (2023/24).

The Money House has had lots of positive feedback from the young people themselves. For example:

*"I would like to say this program was absolutely fantastic. It taught me new ideas of how to save money. Different types of loans you can get. E.g.: hp agreement . My only wish is that more people could get to take part in this program as it is beneficial for young adults".*

**Young person attending The Money House in Haringey**

In collaboration with Centrepoin, Haringey Council, Haringey Housing Providers, and young people in Haringey, we have developed the Skills for Life initiative. This program encompasses 21 modules specifically designed to prepare young individuals for the transition into independent accommodation. The Young Adults Service works closely with foster carers and semi-independent providers to deliver these modules, ensuring that young people receive comprehensive preparation and support as they move towards establishing their own permanent living arrangements.

## **Independent Visitors**

An Independent Visitor (IV) is an appointed individual who provides support and companionship to children and young people in care. Their role involves establishing a positive and trusting relationship, offering emotional support, and being a consistent presence in the lives of these young individuals. IVs regularly visit the children, engage in various activities together, and provide guidance and advice as needed. The main purpose of these visits is to offer support, mentoring, lend a listening ear, and ensure the well-being and rights of the child are upheld.

Both IROs and practitioners actively encourage children and young people to access an IV, where appropriate. This encouragement is documented in the minutes of Children Looked After (CLA) reviews.

In 2023/24, there have been a total of 27 matches supported between IVs and young people. Recognising the high demand for this service, Haringey has increased its IV capacity from 20 to 30 matches, with the ability to spot purchase further matches as required. Several of our young people have benefited from the support of an IV for up to 8 years, indicating the strength of the relationships formed. These young individuals have enjoyed a wide range of activities with their IVs, such as shopping, meals, mini-golf, rock climbing, sports games, museum visits, and many others.

With the continued success of the YP/IV relationships, Haringey continues to see the value these relationships bring in enriching the lives of children and young people in care.

## **Advocacy**

Our children and young people in care access advocacy through Barnardo's. Advocates play a crucial role alongside IROs to support our young people in representing their views, wishes and feelings within review meetings and outside the reviewing process. As with last year our young people have accessed a higher number of advocates than our statistical neighbour with an increase in young people accessing advocacy in the first two quarters.

	Enfield Q1 23/24	Haringey Q1 23/24	Enfield Q2 23/24	Haringey Q2 23/23	Enfield Q3 23/24	Haringey Q3 23/23	Enfield Q4 23/24	Haringey Q4 23/23
No. of CLA accessing advocacy	10	16	5	19	5	16	10	16

## Voice of the Child Strategy

The IROs have remained committed advocates for Haringey's Voice of the Child strategy. They have actively promoted the implementation of the Child Centered Practice Guidance for Reviews during their participation in quarterly service meetings with their respective service links and through reflective discussions with practitioners. This guidance places significant importance on prioritising the voice of the child in the care planning processes and Children Looked After (CLA) Reviews.

In line with this approach, the IROs continue to write CLA review minutes addressing the child or young person directly, using language that demonstrates care and consideration. This practice enhances children and young people's access to and comprehension of their review minutes, which can also serve as a valuable component of their life story work. Moreover, the IROs consistently support and encourage practitioners and team managers to adopt this style of writing in the Social Worker's Report for the Review, as well as in Care and Pathway Plans. This approach has become increasingly recognised as standard practice.

To ensure a more positive and solution-focused experience for the child or young person, the IROs make efforts to establish greater contact with social workers and review participants prior to the CLA review meeting. These interactions enable discussions about any challenges the child or young person may be facing and facilitate collaborative problem-solving. By adopting this approach, the review meetings become more constructive and focused on finding solutions.

As part of the Guidance foster carers are also encouraged to write a letter to the child or young person which outlines their achievements. The examples of these letters have been a true delight to read and also contribute to the child or young person's life story.

Over the coming year we will be introducing Ways of Writing guidance, helping practitioners, managers and multi-agency partners consider the impact of how they record information upon children and young people who have experienced trauma.

Furthermore, we will be asking our children and young people in care, including Aspire members, how they want to provide feedback around their CLA reviews and overall support. This will enable us to develop more focused feedback mechanisms to help develop and enhance the service and support we offer.

## Additional IRO Service developments/achievements 2023-24

### IRO Team Links

Each IRO is assigned to a specific team or service to provide consultation, support, and advice on matters concerning Children in Care. They actively participate in service meetings for their designated team links on a quarterly basis and conduct workshops to promote the implementation of the Child Centred Practice Guidance. Additionally, IROs have recently established links with First Step and CLA Health services to further enhance collaboration and support for children and young people.

### **Vulnerable, Violence & Exploitation (VVE) Panel**

IROs play an active role in the VVE Panel, where they identify and bring attention to vulnerable young people in care who may be at risk of exploitation. They actively share relevant information and intelligence regarding our most concerning cases involving children and young people who are suspected to be experiencing exploitation.

### **Introduction to Health Services Workshops**

The IRO's collaboration with the Designated Nurse for Children in Care has played a crucial role in introducing health services workshops in Haringey. They have taken the lead in organising and facilitating the program, creating an inclusive environment where both facilitators and participants feel comfortable sharing their perspectives.

### **Risk Management Panel**

The IROs play an active role in the strategic and operational planning for Children Looked After who have been remanded into Youth Offending Institutes or are serving a community sentence. One dedicated IRO sits on the Panel to provide valuable insights and input. The IROs contribute to the deliberations regarding the release of these young people, ensuring that comprehensive care plans are in place. They also share regular updates on care planning for young people in the community, allowing for enhanced safety planning and smoother transitions.

### **Organisational Learning & Development**

Two practice educators have been qualified to provide support and facilitate the learning and development of undergraduate students during their placement.

### **Champions Model**

The IROs are enthusiastic in supporting the implementation of the Champions Model in Haringey. Through their reviews, midways and challenge` IROs have begun to identify strategic and systemic challenges in the 5 priority areas:

- Education
- Health & Wellbeing
- Adulthood & Transitions
- Accommodation & Life skills
- Transition/Transitional Safeguarding

In addition to the above there are numerous examples of IROs going the extra mile for our children and young people in care which is not captured within data or Key Performance Indicators. These examples exemplify the passion the IRO service has for the welfare of the young people.

Providing out of hours to support young people overcome anxiety and feel empowered

Spent several hours with YP who needed reassurance with the post 18 options available – able to facilitate an agreed way forward

Actively observing play therapy sessions and contact to gain valuable insights and contribute to a well-informed care plan

Supporting young person to remain within a placement where notice to end had expired

Visited a young person in Wales outside of the review process to strengthen relationships

Facilitating a constructive meeting between the LA and Guardian to collaboratively align on the long-term care plan

Visiting young people outside of reviews to help explore ways to make their meetings more comfortable

Visiting young people in hospital to aid their recovery and provide emotional support

Spending time with a young person who experienced an altercation – enabling better joint working between the LA and placement provider

Conducting an out-of-hours joint visit with the SW to support the SW in meeting with the children individually, fostering a positive environment

## **IRO Service Priorities 2024-25**

When writing the Annual Report for 2022/23, we were ambitious in outlining our goals for the following year, 2023/2024. Our goals were focused on improving outcomes for the children under our care and ensuring a consistently high level of service and we are pleased to report that good progress has been made in the areas identified.

Looking forward to 2024-2025 our priorities are:

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

- We will continue our focus on review minutes to children being good quality and sent out in a timely manner
- We will continue to promote children and young people chairing or co-chairing their review
- We will help ensure children and young people understand their care journeys

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

- We will review our current systems on how we ascertain feedback from children and young people and widen this to include the wider service that they receive
- We will continue to hold timely reviews
- We will continue to embed midway review and monitoring ensuring that there is appropriate challenge to help progress care planning

### **Priority 3: We will be ambitious for Our Children**

- We will support the implementation of Kinship Care frame to help children and young people remain in their families
- We will ensure that children and young people who placed with their parents have their circumstances regularly reviewed.
- We will continue to prioritise achieving permanence for children in our care and develop systems to identify young people being matched within reviews
- We will ensure that we hold 95% of reviews within timescales
- We will explore developing critical learning groups for IROs with other Good and Outstanding Local Authorities
- Raise greater awareness of the Transitional Safeguarding Protocols