



**London Borough
of Hounslow**

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report

1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023

Building relationships makes change possible

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1. Introduction

This Annual Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrating the impact of the IRO services in Hounslow as required by statutory guidance. Statutory guidance states that the manager of the IRO Service for each Local Authority should complete an annual report for the scrutiny of elected Members and the Local Safeguarding Children’s Partnership.


This report reviews the work of the Hounslow IRO Service in 2022/23 in quality assuring and improving services for children in the care of the Local Authority. The report uses performance data, service user feedback and audit findings to review the impact of the IRO Service on the lives of children and young people, and to set out its priorities for 2023/24.




The Children’s Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children’s Act 2002 make it a legal requirement for all Local Authorities to appoint an IRO for each looked after child. The IRO Handbook contains statutory guidance on the role of the IRO in case management and Looked After Reviews, which scrutinise the care plan for the child and listens to their wishes. The IRO has the authority, independent of their employing LA to refer cases to the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) should they believe the Local authority’s plan is not in the best interest of the child. The key duties of an IRO include:

- Quality assuring the care planning process on a continuous basis.
- Chairing LARs, ensuring that the care plan brings stability and drives change and opportunity for looked after children and young people.
- Ensuring that the wishes and feelings of the child are given full consideration and that the Local Authority acts in the best interests of the child in their care planning.
- Challenging drift and delay, especially in achieving permanence for the child.

2. Progress against 2022/23 Priorities

Table 1: Priorities 2022/23

One Hounslow	Priorities	Outcome
<p data-bbox="248 1283 371 1339">Pass the Power</p> 	<p data-bbox="443 1283 580 1314">Priority 1:</p> <p data-bbox="443 1317 866 1509">Provide children and young people the choice to have their LAR’s face to face or virtual and ensure meetings take place in a format that meet the child’s needs.</p> <p data-bbox="443 1585 842 1682">Offer children and young people the opportunity to chair their LARs at every meeting.</p>	<p data-bbox="890 1283 1027 1314">Achieved:</p> <p data-bbox="890 1317 1391 1576">Looked After Reviews are taking place both virtually and face to face. For the most part it is currently the meeting convenor who will determine whether the review is face to face, but should a young person request a specific way of holding the review, this will be accommodated.</p> <p data-bbox="890 1619 1391 1946">Every child and young person above 5 years old is given the opportunity to chair their looked after review. Most do not take up this opportunity, IRO’s have discussed that sometimes chairing doesn’t look the same for a child as an adult and over the next year will focus on how to allow a young person to creatively lead their review.</p>

<p>BE A ROCK</p> 	<p>Priority 2: Return to seeing children face to face as part of the review process and encourage children and young people to participate in their LARs in person.</p> <p>Children between the age of 4 and 9 to be empowered to participate in their reviews and where children do not attend their reviews the IRO to ensure that they speak to the young person to ascertain their views.</p>	<p>Achieved: As above, children are being seen face to face. We are now in a post-covid era and whilst technology is still utilised to increase efficiency, it is noted that seeing children and young people face to face is a priority for all professionals.</p> <p>It is difficult to measure the participation of children aged 4-9 but feedback from the IROs is that they are working hard to encourage participation, either at the meeting or by meeting them before or after the review.</p>
<p>Do New</p> 	<p>Priority 3: Review practice guidance around transitions and the review of Pathway Plans for young people moving into adulthood.</p> <p>Facilitate workshops for Personal Advisors (PA) on Pathway plans and the review of plans following a young person's 18th birthday.</p> <p>Develop a pack for PA with guidance on Pathway plans and Pathway Reviews. This could be used as an induction tool for all new PA.</p> <p>Offer consultation to PA on Pathway plans on request</p>	<p>Not Achieved: The changes in both the Safeguarding and Review Manager and the Leaving Care Team Manager have meant that this has not come into fruition at all. Work has been completed on looking at the compliance of Pathway plans with the new Ofsted criteria and on the whole, the picture shows that we are mostly compliant as a service and that Pathway plans are completed to a good standard.</p> <p>It is clear there is still a need for open dialogue between the teams and further consideration to the role of the IRO in managing the post 18 transition.</p> <p>It is also vital that IRO's scrutinise the plans to Quality Assure them in terms of the new Ofsted criteria for Care Leavers. These criteria will play a significant part in the formation of Pathway Plans. Further discussions between the Team Managers can lead to more interactive.</p>
<p>Lead with heart</p> 	<p>Priority 4: Strengthen the review process by improve midways, ensuring that most children and young people have a midway between their LAR and this is clearly recorded on LCS. Target set at 85%.</p>	<p>Part Achieved: There have been 110 mid way reviews for 89 different children showing that Midway reviews are embedded for a number of children. Further work needs to be done to refine the data that is pulled from LCS to understand the picture more completely. A dip sample undertaken to understand the picture for this report shows that 70%</p>


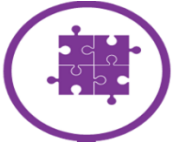
		of children have had a midway review since their last full review and this is encouraging. Dip sampling on a regular basis will provide a further picture over the next year.
<p>Lead with the Heart</p> 	<p>Priority 5: Embed the IRO resolution process and reporting arrangements to increase the impact of IRO intervention in quickly identifying, escalating and addressing any emergent issues of concern.</p>	<p>Achieved: This is now fully embedded, and it is working well. The target for this year will be to ensure that reporting on informal challenge is collated to understand the relationship between informal and formal escalation and the nature of the IRO footprint across the service.</p>
<p>Harness the mix</p> 	<p>Priority 6: Continue to improve the timely completion of LAR's and LAR minutes and confirm that minutes have been shared with the child and other relevant partners and parents to ensure actions are followed through.</p> <p>Facilitate workshops for social workers and foster carers on LAR's and their role and responsibilities preparing for and participating in the LAR and taking responsibility for the actions identified.</p>	<p>Achieved: LAC review timeliness improved from 85% in 21/22 to 88.4% of reviews in time on time for this last year 22/23. This is for 2nd and following reviews. This exceeds the targets set last year and clearly shows that the systems and processes are coming together well to ensure that children experiencing care are getting clear line of oversight of their care plans in a timely manner.</p> <p>Workshops continue to be developed and a roll out for our newer foster carers in particular is anticipated in the autumn.</p>

Table 1: Feedback on priorities for 22/23

3. The IRO Service in Hounslow

In addition to their statutory responsibilities, IRO's in Hounslow:

- Support and advise others involved in the life of the child, including the Long-Term Fostering Panel on family finding, Life Story Circle and the Transition Panel.
- Feedback to Case Monitoring Board, Permanency Sub-Group, Rehab Tracking Panel, Transition panel (through IRO manager).
- Celebrating Permanency outside of traditional adoptive placements.
- Scrutinise the Pathway Plans for LAC aged 16 up to six months after they leave care. This may include chairing the first post-18 Pathway Plan review. The IRO can intervene if they have concerns about the plan and this Hounslow-specific arrangement supports a seamless transition for care leavers.
- Attend Children in Care Council (CiCC) meetings.
- Support Total Respect Training as adult trainers.
- Take a leading role in organising the annual Kids in Care Awards (KICA).

What is notable about the IRO Team in Hounslow is their commitment to the children and young people. They attend meetings such as PEP's or consultations with schools, keyworkers,

and health meetings. They support our Leaving Care population well beyond the 3 months post-18 requirement because of the relationships they have built with these young adults. They advocate with Housing Services and Home Office decisions. They have worked hard with The Ride care home to bring stability for the residents and ensuring the whole team enjoy a renewed sense of purpose. At its core, the team hold fast to the Hounslow Practice Framework which places our children and young people at the centre.

The looked after population are distributed across 4 services in the borough. This means that there are a range of priorities and challenges that the IROs work within and are aware of within the service. Working with the Intake and Safeguarding Teams the challenges are often scrutinising the appropriate care plan for a child to establish permanency, whether this is within the Family Court arena, working closely with the Court appointed Guardian or when children and young people are placed in care in acute circumstances and for shorter periods. Working with the Adolescent Team, the challenges are usually based around the placement crisis and finding placements who will provide appropriate support to vulnerable and high-risk adolescents who are mostly at extra-familial risk. This team also holds our 16–17-year-old voluntary care population, who are usually placed in semi-independent accommodation and require support to prepare for independence. Working with the Through Care Team, support and scrutiny are not only provided to our UASC population but also to our long-term indigenous population.

The challenge and drive with this group is to ensure stability and permanency, understanding of their story through Life Story Work and the development and driving of a care plan that affords each child the opportunity to reach their potential. The broad focus of work and challenges within each service and looked after group necessitate a skilled and flexible workforce who are able both to advocate for the children and young people but also scrutinise and where necessary challenge care planning and care planning decisions. It is apparent from the feedback received and the observations of the IRO service that this group is able to meet this challenge and provide an indomitable backstop for the children and young people who are looked after in the borough.

The IRO's use their experience to adapt their engagement with children and young people. Direct work is undertaken with young people when needed and there are numerous examples where the IRO has been instrumental in moving the care plan on. The positive feedback from young people and their parents demonstrates the impact of this individualised approach.

3.1. Resourcing and Demographics

The IRO Service consists of six IRO's (four permanent, full-time, one locum and one 0.6 posts) and their line-manger, the Safeguarding, Review and Quality Assurance Manager, who is permanent. There has been a temporary post in place, filled by a Locum IRO, since October 2022 when a large increase of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) required a dedicated member of staff to be able to provide a service for them.

At the end of May 2023, the IRO in our part-time post will go on maternity leave, leaving a smaller caseload to be allocated. With a reduction in UASC cases due to their transfers to other boroughs or to them turning 18 and leaving care, the locum post will have the space to absorb these cases. The impact of which means that we have an IRO who knows and understands the Hounslow system able to provide an "already knowledgeable" service to the children and young people who will have to change IRO. Whilst a lack of continuity for any child or young person is regrettable, this will mitigate any serious impact from the change.

The service has seen two changes in managers over the last year. The outgoing manager who wrote the previous annual report left the service at the end of May 2022 and a new manager took over in August 2022. This manager had previously provided short term cover

for the service and was familiar with its remit and the Borough in general. In February 2023 this manager stepped up into a new role and a new manager for the team was appointed. This manager had already been a manager in an operational role for a number of years and was familiar with the team and the Borough. This has helped to mitigate the impact of another transition for the team. It is noted that there will be some instability brought about by the changes in management that have been experienced. This should not have any impact on the experiences of children and young people open to the service.

There has been one permanent change in the service with the permanent recruitment to the part time post in June 2022. The locum IRO has also changed in March 2023. Otherwise, the service has remained stable in the reporting period. The remaining IRO's have all been in post for more than 3 years and this brings a stability for the children and young people they advocate for with regards to familiarity and consistency, most especially when there have been a higher turnover and more changes in other services and for other professionals.

The IRO team continue to support each other and other services, consistently volunteering for cover, providing support to workers and driving forward care plans in order that children and young people have their needs met and are provided with far reaching services. The impact of this is that whilst there has been disruption through staff changes in other services, the children and young people have been provided with a continuous service and their outcomes still achieved. This is reflected in the feedback received, covered later in this report.

The demographics of the service have altered slightly over the last 12 months. The service remains predominantly female (86%) with the only male (14%) being the locum IRO and the manager being female. The gender bias of the service reflects the wider national workforce as recorded in the Children's Social Work Workforce annual report published by the Department for Education¹. This recorded that 87% of the workforce was female and 13% male.

Age Band / Gender	Under 1	1 - 4	5 - 9	10 - 12	13 - 15	16 plus	Total
Female	7	10	17	15	27	33	109
Male	3	18	15	14	24	146	220
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	10	28	32	29	51	179	329
Female %	70%	36%	53%	52%	53%	18%	33%
Male %	30%	64%	47%	48%	47%	82%	67%
Indeterminate (%)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 2: Hounslow LAC population by gender.

The above table shows the gender breakdown of our looked after population. It is clear that there is a male bias. The Office of National Statistics² shows that in the UK 51% of the populations is female and 49% male. (This is of course using a clear binary system that our

¹ Department for Education, Feb 2023, Children's Social Work Workforce. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce/2022>

² www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk

data uses presently as well)³. The skewed data for the population in Hounslow is likely due to the predominant gender of the UASC population (which numbers around 100 at the time this data was produced) is male. Whilst our team is not reflective of the LAC population in terms of gender, the male IRO works with the majority of UASC and in allocating IRO's there is a sensitivity to gender, should a specific gender be requested.

The ethnicity demographic breakdown of the team shows that diversity has been reduced across the team in the last 12 months with 72% of the team being of white ethnic origin and 28% being of black ethnic origin. There is no evidence to show that this has had an impact on the children and young people, however this is and must be part of a wider conversation regarding disproportionality which is continuing across the service and across the borough.

Ethnicity	CLA	LBH pop	% CLA	LBH pop %
Asian	48	19,247	14.6%	33.5%
Black	74	5,936	22.5%	10.3%
Mixed	41	5,187	12.5%	9.0%
Other	60	2,655	18.2%	4.6%
White	106	24,462	32.2%	42.6%
Total	329	57,487		

Table 3: Hounslow LAC population by ethnicity.

The above table shows the current diversity of the looked after population in Hounslow. Again, like the gender data, it is likely to be skewed by the high proportion of UASC currently in the LAC population. This may especially account for the higher proportion of black children and young people in our overall population. There must also be consideration to the work completed by the Hounslow Youth Offending Service in 2021 which looks at disproportionality in the youth justice system and undertakes to consider the reasons for the higher proportion of black young men in the system.

It is noted that given the increasing prominence of Adolescents in the looked after population where criminal exploitation and extra familial harm are the key drivers for their looked after status, it is likely that there is thus going to be a disproportionate amount of young black men in our looked after population too. This is an area that needs considerable work to understand the impact, the causes and service provision that will need to be considered to meet this need. An example of this is that the 2021 report found that many of the young black men in the criminal justice system had profound speech and language difficulties that had never been assessed until they reached this service, and this had a significant impact on their emotional literacy and their ability to process their complex and often traumatised experiences.

The changes in ethnicity demographics for the team means that we are slightly less representative of the Hounslow looked after population. However, there is still broad representation, and this information does not take into consideration cultural or religious practices either.

3.2. The Looked After Population

³ There is work to be completed to understand the proportion of the LAC population that do not relate to the conventional binary perspective of gender and how this can be recorded and represented. From the knowledge of the LAC population and from our relationships and close work with them, it is clear that it is becoming an increasingly important area to record.

	20/21	2022/23											
Month & Year	Outturn	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
CLA	255	291	287	288	290	295	331	372	386	392	371	366	329
Rate per 10,000	38.8	44.2	43.6	43.8	44.1	44.9	50.3	56.6	58.7	59.6	56.4	55.6	50.0
UASC	38	83	79	76	71	75	121	156	166	174	157	148	114
UASC 16+	32	80	76	73	69	73	113	142	154	167	152	145	112
% UASC	14.9%	28.5%	27.5%	26.4%	24.5%	25.4%	36.6%	41.9%	43.0%	44.4%	42.3%	40.4%	34.7%

Table 4: Mean number of CLA and UASC per month in 22/23

The LAC population on 31st March 2023 was 347, a 17.6% increase from 295 on that day in 2022. Whilst this number does not represent the highest it has been over the course of 22/23 (see December 2022), given that a number of UASC have turned 18 subsequently from the considerable and rapid increase in October and November 2022, it does demonstrate the significant impact that the situation has had on the service with each permanent member of the team having to increase their workload to be able to provide a service to these vulnerable young people, often where there had not yet been an allocated social worker.

Admissions	2021/22												Full year
	Apr	May	June	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Under 1	1	3	1	0	3	0	3	0	1	3	2	1	18
1-4	0	0	1	2	1	0	1	2	3	1	2	2	15
5-9	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	5
10-12	2	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	9
13-15	4	3	2	5	5	1	3	0	2	2	2	1	30
16 and over	9	2	5	8	4	12	8	7	8	9	11	22	105
TOTAL	17	8	10	17	14	13	16	9	16	17	18	27	182
Discharges	Apr	May	June	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Under 1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	3
1-4	1	2	1	3	5	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	16
5-9	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	5
10-12	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	3
13-15	0	5	0	3	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	12
16-17	2	3	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	2	1	12
18+	7	5	8	10	7	4	10	4	3	6	8	1	73
TOTAL	11	16	10	17	15	7	12	7	4	9	10	6	124

Table 5: Showing admissions and discharges by age for 21/22

Admissions	2022/23												Year to date
	Apr	May	June	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Under 1	1	3	1	2	0	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	13
1-4	0	0	0	0	2	3	1	1	3	2	1	0	13

5-9	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	2	11
10-12	1	1	1	0	3	1	0	2	1	2	3	1	16
13-15	3	2	4	2	2	7	10	8	2	0	2	0	42
16 and over	2	4	3	9	13	43	40	15	11	3	4	5	152
TOTAL	7	10	11	15	20	56	52	29	18	8	13	8	247
Discharges	Ap	Ma	Jun	Jul	Au	Se	Oc	No	De	Ja	Fe	Ma	
	r	y	e		g	p	t	v	c	n	b	r	
Under 1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
1-4	0	2	0	0	1	1	2	0	1	1	2	2	12
5-9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
10-12	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	3	0	0	7
13-15	0	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	16
16-17	2	0	2	1	3	5	3	3	3	6	2	22	52
18+	10	9	6	9	9	10	7	5	4	13	10	13	105
TOTAL	12	14	10	12	14	19	14	11	11	24	16	39	196

Table 6: Showing admissions and discharges by age for 22/23

The comparative data for admissions by age shows that whilst there has been a clear increase in the over 16 population as noted due to the increase of UASC in October, November, December between this last year and the previous year, admissions for the 0-12 year olds has been comparatively similar. This signifies that our there has been little change in the natural ebb and flow of our indigenous looked after population. The impact of the UASC increase on the indigenous population was explored in a report by Elizna Visser in April 2023 and has been discussed in more detail below in 4.3.

It is noted that there is a significant increase in discharges from care in March 23. This signified the start of the movement of UASC to other boroughs across the UK which has alleviated the pressure on all services somewhat. With the employment of a locum to mitigate the impact of the increase of UASC for the IRO Team, the average case load has fallen over the last year to 63. Where the IRO handbook recommends between 50-70 cases. This is not, however, equally distributed across the team and the current manager is working to bring some equilibrium across the service.

4. IRO Oversight

4.1. The Looked After Review (LAR)

The Looked After Review is an opportunity for the IRO to oversee and scrutinise the care plan, represent the voice of the child and ensure that all professionals are undertaking decisions that are in the best interests for the child. The Looked After Review is, however, the child's meeting and the agenda, discussion and planning should be driven by the child in as far as possible. It is therefore encouraged that the child takes an active part in their review and if they feel confident enough, that they chair their review. Overall, 86.54% of children contributed to their looked after review in some way which is a significant proportion of the looked after population. This highlights how well the Independent Reviewing Officers are working to encourage engagement in the care plan and for the young person to advocate for the needs, wishes and feelings.

Attendance Type	Count of Case Number	% of reviews
PN1 Child attended & spoke for self	534	74.17%
PN3 Child attended - gave views nonverbally	4	0.56%
PN4 Child attended without contributing	5	0.69%
PN5 Child not attended, advocate briefed with views	5	0.69%

PN6 Child not attended, views sent	75	10.42%
PN7 Child not attended & did not send views	97	13.47%
Grand Total	720	100.00%

Table 7: Child Participation in reviews.

The participation data shows that 74.17% of children and young people attended their review. These totals also include those children who are 0-5 who do not participate in their view. They are marked separately on the review form, but that category does not appear to have transferred through to this data. However, this is still a high number of children and young people who are participating in their review and are involved in the planning of their care. The impact of this is that the plans are shaped around the voice of the child, they know who is responsible for supporting them and they are invested in those plans.

	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
First LAC Review			
In Time	90	131	119
Late Review	28	24	54
% In Time	76.3	84.5	67.2
Second LAC Review			
In Time	84	119	130
Late Review	19	6	14
% In Time	81.5	95.2	90.3
Other LAC Review			
In Time	516	492	487
Late Review	14	10	20
% In Time	97.3	98.0	96.1
% overall	85.0	95.6	84.5

Table 8: LAC review timeliness

Overall, LAR timeliness has fallen this year, although comparatively with 20/21. This is most notably in the timescales to the 1st review and entirely and almost certainly as a result of managing the number of UASC in October, November and December. I remain confident that the service and the IRO's do everything they can to meet the requirement for a first review within 20 working days and that there will be a marked improvement in the overall timeliness as well as to first review. The impact of a delayed review is that children and young people wait for the scrutiny to their care plan and the advocacy that an IRO provides to their own needs and voice. The first review sets the focus on the plan and addresses any initial issues and must be timely for any child or young person. Contingency is now in place to ensure that should a further increase of UASC be received in the year 23/24, there should be no impact on the timeliness of reviews.

At the 31st March 2023 LAR Minute timeliness was at 71.43% completed within 15 days. This is 13% lower than the same day previous year. Minutes should be shared with the young person and professional in order that the plan can be set and progressed between reviews. Any delay causes delay for that child or young person in progressing that plan. It also significantly holds up the workflow and prevents the care plan from being updated. It is noted that pre-meeting reports not being completed prior to the review can cause significant delay in review minutes being completed as it blocks the workflow. As noted below, only 48.6% of these reports are being completed on time which will delay the workflow and skew the data.

The social work team provide a pre-meeting report. This represents the 6-monthly assessment of risk and need for the child and should drive the recommendations and targets for the care plan. The target for this report to be circulated is 5 working days before the review so that it

can be absorbed by the young person (where possible) and the professional network. Currently only 48.6% of these reports are being completed on time representing a key priority for improvement over the next year. Following the quality assurance activity and the review of the impact of UASC on our indigenous LAC population; scrutiny has intensified on the production of timely pre-meeting reports, IRO's report via the Team Manager to HOS's which provides a direct line of sight to the activity within the team. There has already been improved compliance where dip sampling in Through Care Team in April shows that the 70% of reports were completed 5 days prior to the review. The quality of these reports has also improved although qualitative data is not yet available. A likely overhaul of the LAR process over the next year will show considerable improvement in this area.

4.2. The IRO Footprint and IRO Challenge

The IRO service uses informal challenge to open dialog, and this often results in an agreement being reached. The Issue Resolution Process is followed where agreement cannot be reached between the IRO and professionals. An IRO challenge is raised with the Team Manager and may be escalated to the relevant Head of Service and/or Assistant Director of Children's Safeguarding & Specialist Services if it cannot be resolved with the line managers.

It is standard practice that challenges are raised informally initially, this gives opportunity to resolve the problem without the need for escalation and in the hope that responses are swift. Challenges are entirely focussed on the care plan and any actions or decisions taken by the operational teams that are not considered to be in the child or young person's best interests. This may be an issue regarding contact, a placement change, education decision or it may be intervening where a parent has a strong view (eg piercings or haircuts). For the most part, these issues are resolved very swiftly and discussion, reflection on the evidence base (most especially where contact is the issue), a review of the court agreed care plan or current contact supervision notes will allow for the teams to resolve whatever the issue may be.

Informal challenges take place regularly and are a way of demonstrating the IRO involvement in the care planning across the review period and not just at each formal review. The impact of this for the child is considerable given that the IRO is advocating in their best interests and there to independently consider decisions made in care planning without agenda. The challenge for the upcoming year is ensuring that these are represented on the child's file and collecting the data to ensure that this is the case.

Formal IRO Challenges were raised for 6 children, against 10 in 2021/22. These are not taken lightly and raised when there is no satisfactory response from the social work team or management. The number has continued to drop over the last few years. This is likely due to the fact that relationships are strong between the social work teams and the IRO team and therefore any issue is resolved without a necessity to make a formal challenge. It will therefore be important to analyse the data over the next year to be able to understand the relationship between formal and informal challenge.

The range of formal challenges has been diverse. One challenge was to the CSE screening outcome for a child who had disclosed that she was being exploited, given names and that this was an ongoing issue but she had been scored at medium risk using the tool; One was due to concerns around the lack of stability in placements for a young person who had a care plan of long term fostering; One challenge was due to concerns that a plan for reunification was premature and that the young person would continue to be at risk of exploitation; One was regarding placement stability for a younger child who had had multiple placement moves; One around the consideration of special educational needs and placement setting and one around a child continuing to be in an unregulated placement where an appropriate placement had not been sourced.

It is acknowledged that there are difficulties in securing placements for young people that meet their needs and most especially with our adolescent cohort that are able to keep them safe from extra-familial harm. However, it is also right that independent scrutiny is given to the suitability of these placements and challenge raised where they are not appropriate. It is a difficult balance to bring but the impact of a placement that works for a young person is significant and can ensure that a pathway or direction of travel for a young person is changed significantly if they are able to experience stability and build strong relationships.

Midway reviews of the care plan are not a statutory requirement but provide another means of quality assuring a care plan for a child and for the IRO footprint to be traceable on a child's file. The impact of IRO oversight cannot be diminished as noted in Coram BAAF's response to the care review⁴ *"IROs see the bigger picture. They understand the subtleties of a child and their journey. They will have met with the birth parents, the siblings, foster carers and the child. If you think about an ecomap for a child – in their role, the IRO's almost embody this. They ensure birth parents have a voice, they know why some things have happened for a child and others haven't. They hold this and often operate in an extremely skilled way for children."*

4.3. Quality Assurance Activity

In October and November 2022, a large increase of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) were placed in a hotel in Feltham by the Home Office. London Borough of Hounslow became automatically responsible for their care, and this meant that case numbers rose exponentially during this period. It has a significant impact on the Through Care Team and the IRO team who were very stretched to manage the care of these young people. It was important to review and understand the impact of this on the indigenous care population in Hounslow and whether their care had been affected by the stretched services. The IRO team and IRO manager undertook audits of long-term cases open to Through Care Team. The team graded the cases as follows.

Case	LCS number	IRO Audit score	Team Manager score	Moderated score
1	5009549	4	5	2
2	5022444	2	4	2
3	5049983	3	4	3
4	1069078	7.5	7.5	5
5	1062769	5	6	2

Table 9: Audit grading.

A report pulling together the key findings was written by Elizna Visser. The findings are summarised below:

- Children have stable placements, and many were matched and linked to their carers and were being provided with excellent care.
- The issues that caused low scores on the audits were related to compliance issues and not to any safeguarding concerns for the children.
- LAC review reports and Care Plans were not always of good quality and often the care plans contained outdated information.
- Feedback regarding social workers from carers and young people was generally good.
- Case Summaries, chronologies and genograms needed updating.
- IRO footprint was not always evident on the case file.
- Some of these issues pre-date the UASC increase.

⁴ James Bury, 2022, Care Review and the role of Independent Reviewing Officers. [Care review and the role of Independent Reviewing Officers | CoramBAAF](#)

The pre-meeting report represents the assessment of risk and need for each child and therefore should be completed with analysis and recommendations 5 days prior to the Looked After Review where these recommendations and the child's wishes, and feeling will be considered, and the plan reviewed and updated to move forward. The completion of the care plan after the review should represent the work needed to be undertaken over the next year. These are both vital documents to ensure that the plan for each looked after child and young person is moving forward, as corporate parents it is essential that we drive this in order that each child in the Local Authorities care is able to reach and achieve their potential. The impact of a stagnant or outdated care plan can mean that professionals are not clear on how to assist a child in meeting their potential, this is a significant impact for the child.

The IRO's continue to scrutinise the quality of the care plans and pre-meeting reports to ensure that practice is improved in this area. Following the audit activity, a clear action plan has been put in place to ensure that practice compliance standards are raised across the board. It has also prompted a need for a review and re-model of the paperwork included in the lac review workflow. This is a large project to be undertaken over the coming year.

Further quality assurance work will be undertaken during this period as well including; dip samples throughout the year to evidence improved timeliness and quality of pre-meeting reports, care plans and lac review minutes.

5. Feedback

Feedback is an essential means of understanding directly how the service is performing, key areas for development and how the service needs to adopt to meet the needs of those who are utilising it. Feedback comes from a variety of routes.

5.1. The new consultation/ feedback system

In 2022/23 the IRO Team development of a new feedback system that is now fully in place and has already improved the amount of feedback the service receives, most especially from children and young people. This feedback system was created and developed by 2 of the IRO's who have utilised google technology to create a survey that is sent out after the completion of Looked After Review. The survey is then able to anonymise the information and produce an excel spreadsheet that contains the responses to the survey. This provides a quick and easy way to collate and then compare the feedback, providing a more efficient route to draw out themes and develop and improve the service. The impact of this will be that service improvement is determined directly by the people, both looked after young people, their families and professionals, who are utilising the service.

In the short time that the IRO's have been using this process 14 adults and 9 young people have provided feedback. All the IRO's have a system up and running now and we should have more feedback and data around that feedback over the coming year.

5.2. Complaints

There have been no formal complaints in this IRO service in the year 22/23.

5.3. Feedback and Testimonials

The below snapshot of feedback and testimonials for 2022/23 demonstrate how much IROs can impact the lives of children, and the bonds of trust that can form, in the children's and their carers own words. IROs are often the only consistent professional in the child's life and IRO's in Hounslow prioritise building relationships with children.

From Young People	
"Best IRO is xxxx, no questions asked"	
From Parents	
"I am xxxx's mother. I want to express my great pleasure working with xxxx. For me, she is an outstanding professional and all meetings with her were a pleasure for me. In the difficult period I was going through, she tried to prepare me and was extremely kind and polite. I don't think I want to give advice on changing the way it works. On the contrary, I hope that there will be more and more people like her, because apart from being extremely good at her job, she is a wonderful person!"	
From professionals	
"I want to express my appreciation for xxx's excellent communication skills. She was able to provide us with clear information about xxxxx's education, mental and physical health, and his ongoing case status. She also gave us advice on how to move forward and, we feel more confident in our ability to support Frank thanks to her guidance. xxxx's friendly and warm approach also made a significant impression on us and xxxxx. She was very polite to xxxx, making him feel at ease, and also offered him extra help with his studies. It's clear that she genuinely cares about the wellbeing of the children, and we appreciate that. Overall, we had a delightful experience with xxxxx, and we look forward to future reviews with her"	"xxxx have had the pleasure of working with xxxx. xxxxx really went above and beyond for the young person who resided with us. The reviews were well organised and child focused. xxxxx took the time to show an outstanding level of support and encouragement and built up a trusting professional relationship. We cannot speak more highly of the quality of all reviews that xxxxx chaired. We really appreciate all xxxx has done for our young person and we hope to work with xxxx in the future. xxxx is an outstanding IRO and we really appreciate her commitment to our young person."
"I know there's been discussions recently about doing away with the IRO role but my view has always been that if the role was used properly, the system works brilliantly for children. Unfortunately, too often is not the case, for many reasons. You have helped restored my faith in the role."	

Table 10: IRO feedback

5.4. Learning from Feedback

There are areas to consider that need improvement and development from the feedback received:

- **Only 44% of young people who provided feedback knew what the role of the IRO was.**
- **85% felt listened to during their review.**
- **A different 85% had their questions answered.**





Overall, Children and Young people feel listened to, understood and advocated for. They know they can ask questions and will get a response from their IRO. This is built on the relationships between the IRO and child/young person and this demonstrates a strong foundation in the service that is built around the practice framework.

Work has started to ensure that young people understand the role of the IRO and how they are there to assist and help them. Working with the young people to develop the service is a key part of our priority over the next year. The annual survey for our looked after young people

has not yet been reported on, there is a considerable section on IRO's and Looked After Reviews. Once the information and responses from the survey are collated we can understand as a service how and where we need to focus our development and improvement. Working with young people and care leavers to determine how to improve the service, we are likely to have a greater impact for the looked after population.

6. Priorities for 2022/23

Table 2: Priorities for 23/24.

One Hounslow	Priorities
<p data-bbox="225 533 392 600">Pass on the Power</p> 	<p data-bbox="437 533 580 566">Priority 1:</p> <ul data-bbox="491 566 1390 633" style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop a leaflet to children and young people which outlines the IRO profile and their role.
<p data-bbox="252 831 365 864">Do New</p> 	<p data-bbox="437 831 580 864">Priority 2:</p> <ul data-bbox="491 864 1434 969" style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop a "Match and Link certificate" for children and young people to celebrate their finding their forever family. This enhances placement stability and identity. <p data-bbox="437 1003 580 1037">Priority 3:</p> <ul data-bbox="491 1037 1434 1171" style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Review and redevelop the Looked After Review workflow; including pre-meeting reports, LAC care plans, LAC review outcomes and LAC review minutes. Ensure that care experienced young people feed into the redevelopment process so the documents meet their needs.
<p data-bbox="236 1205 381 1272">Lead with heart</p> 	<p data-bbox="437 1205 580 1238">Priority 4:</p> <ul data-bbox="491 1238 1434 1305" style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Strengthen the review process and IRO footprint by refining our data and setting a target for 85% midway reviews completed.
<p data-bbox="220 1503 397 1570">Harness the mix</p> 	<p data-bbox="437 1503 580 1536">Priority 5:</p> <ul data-bbox="491 1536 1434 1641" style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Improve the timeliness of LAR's and LAR minutes to meet the target of 90% Looked after reviews withing timescales and 95% LAC review minutes within timescales. <p data-bbox="437 1675 580 1709">Priority 6:</p> <ul data-bbox="491 1709 1434 1843" style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ensure that 16+ reviews include details of preparation for independence; the opportunities to learn and work, both physical health and emotional well being and transition plans for moving to leaving care.