

Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report

April 2022-March 2023



SURREY
COUNTY COUNCIL

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Executive Summary

This Annual Report produced by the Independent Reviewing Service is prepared in accordance with the statutory requirement to inform the Corporate Parenting Board and senior leaders about the Council's performance in respect of children in the care of the local authority.

The report covers the reporting period April 2022 to March 2023. The service has had a busy year, similar to previous years. Data in this report is based on information taken from Tableau, Surrey Children's Services' performance data system on 24th April 2023.

At the end of March 2023 Surrey had 1028 looked after children in our care. There had been a decrease in the number of children becoming looked after for the first time during the year 2022/23 (385 children) compared to the previous year 2021/22 (452 children), with similar numbers of children ending their care journey through returning to birth parents, special guardianship, adoption, turning 18, etc. (406 vs 402). There were lower numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering care (104 vs 132), but with a higher number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children turning 18 during the year (102 vs 69). The Care Leavers population has increased, with 850 care leavers receiving support at the end of March 2023.

The year saw the publication of [The Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#)¹ on 23rd May 2022, which recommended a range of changes in the way we support and work with families, our children who are in care and our care leavers. It recommended huge ongoing investment by government on a significant scale. One of the recommendations from the review was to remove the role of Independent Reviewing Officers. On 2nd February 2023 the government responded to the review - [Children's social care: stable homes, built on love - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)². The government accepted and endorsed a number of recommendations made within the review, but not all.

We welcomed the government's recognition of the significant role that Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) play in the lives of our children in care, often being the most consistent person for the child through their journey in care, and also in the role of scrutinising the care arrangements made by the local authority in meeting that child's needs. We welcome the recognition that more needs to be done to strengthen the role of the IRO. We also welcome the recognition of additional support to care leavers, befriending support through offer on independent visitors, importance of kinship carers, although the government's funding commitment has not yet been sufficient to achieve many of the necessary changes.

1. The Legal Context and Purpose of the service

The Independent Reviewing Service has been a statutory requirement since 2004. In 2010 the government published the ['Independent Reviewing Officer's Handbook'](#)³, which is statutory guidance for IROs and local authorities. This was implemented in April 2011 and was linked to the revised [Care Planning Regulations and Guidance](#)⁴ (2010). The responsibilities of the IRO have been broadened to include not only the management of the review process but a wider overview of the case, including regular monitoring and follow up between reviews.

¹ https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf

² [Children's social care stable homes built on love consultation \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

³ [iro_statutory_guidance_iros_and_las_march_2010_tagged.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ [The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

The statutory duties of the IRO are to [\[section 25B \(1\), 1989 Act\]](#).⁵

- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case.
- participate in any review of the child's case.
- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

The core tasks of the IRO are defined as follows:

- The primary task of the IRO is to ensure the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child. As corporate parents, each local authority should act for the children they look after as a responsible and conscientious parent would act.
- The IRO also has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. This should include identifying patterns of concern. Where IROs identify more general concerns around the quality of the authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should alert senior managers. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice.

There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of the IRO:

- chairing the child's review; and
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

2. The Surrey Context

Surrey is the third largest home county and third most populated county in the Southeast, after Hampshire and Kent. Surrey has an overall population of approximately 1.2million people. Based on projected data in [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#)⁶ (JSNA) there are estimated to be 71 000 children aged 0-4 in Surrey (5.9% of the population); 77 000 children aged 5-9 (6.4%); 78 000 children aged 10-14 (6.5%) ;and 67 700 children aged 15-19 (5.6%) (The population is predominantly white (British/Other White) (90.4%), with relatively small numbers from Asian (Asian/Asian British: Indian/Other Asian groups/Pakistani) (5.7%); Black (Black/African/Caribbean/Black British) (1.1%); and Mixed/Other ethnic (2.9%) backgrounds.

Surrey County Council (CC)'s strategy is set out in the [2030 Community Vision for Surrey](#)⁷. Some of Surrey's key ambitions for children and young people are:

- Children and young people are safe and feel safe and confident.
- Everyone benefits from education, skills and employment opportunities that help them succeed in life.
- Everyone lives healthy, active, and fulfilling lives, and makes good choices about their wellbeing.
- Everyone gets the health and social care support and information they need at the right time and place.

⁵ [Children Act 1989 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [SCC JSNA Surrey Context: People and Places | Tableau Public](#)

⁷ [Community vision for Surrey in 2030 - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](#)

Surrey's Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) provides robust assurance of the whole corporate parenting system, ensuring Surrey is an outstanding corporate parent to its children; and that all looked after children and care leavers can achieve their full potential in life. Surrey CPB puts looked after children and care leavers at the heart of everything we do. The [Corporate Parenting Strategy](#)⁸ is currently under review and will:

- set out our vision and high aspirations for our children.
- show how we plan to achieve our aims.
- explain how we will fulfil our corporate parenting responsibilities to all our children and young people in care and care leavers.

The [Local Offer for Care Leavers](#)⁹ is accessible online.

3. The Independent Reviewing Service in Surrey

The Independent Reviewing Service is part of the Quality and Performance Division and sits within Quality Assurance Service. It is made up of 4 teams of Independent Chairs, linked to each of the quadrants in Surrey. The Independent Chairs undertake a dual role, incorporating the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and Child Protection Chair role. Each team is supported by a full time Service Coordinator.

Currently there are 29.4 full time equivalent (FTE) Independent Chairs (90% of permanent staff), and caseloads are within the recommended range as set out in the IRO Handbook (2011) for looked after children. For some Independent Chairs the number of children they have oversight for will increase when taking into consideration children subject to child protection plans. Within the team, there is a range of specialist knowledge and expertise, including knowledge of children with disabilities, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), care leavers, fostering and child sexual and criminal exploitation. For the purpose of this report, I will refer to Independent Chairs as IROs, as the work reflected on in this report pertains to their role for looked after children.

We reduced the reliance on agency staff within our service through recruitment of permanent staff, with only 3 agency staff currently within our 30 FTE capacity. There is an open recruitment campaign for Independent Chairs with the vision of recruiting permanent staff for the 3 positions held still by agency staff. We held a Service Coordinator post vacancy although the Service Manager has provided ongoing supervision and support to the team during this period. We aim to recruit permanently to this post before end of May.

One of the Service Coordinators has led on a piece of work to improve our feedback forms. We are in the process of finalising our new feedback forms, having consulted with staff, and children through our User Voice and Participation Team. We hope to have the final product by June 2023, which will support us to continuously reflect and improve our service delivery to our children in care.

We collaborated closely with colleagues from User Voice and Participation who delivered an excellent training to all IROs at a Service meeting around engaging children and young people in their review meetings.

Another Service Coordinator led a workshop to IROs on engagement with children with disabilities, exploring diverse ways of seeking and capturing their participation and views within their looked after

⁸ [Surrey County Council's Corporate Parenting Board and Strategy - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹ [Our local offer to care leavers - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](#)

review. A further workshop was held, focussing on reviewing looked after minutes, to ensure we accurately reflect the child and family's identity, and this is taken into consideration in assessment and service delivery.

We continue to review the quality of our letters to our children through supervision, ensuring we capture their journey succinctly and accurately, and jargon free, capturing their identity, their wishes and feelings, hopes and dreams, being aspirational for our children.

We implemented a process of scrutiny of unregulated placements and Service Coordinators attend meetings as required and able to, where a child is living and being cared for in an unregulated provision.

Through the learning from the [Safeguarding children with disabilities in residential settings](#)¹⁰ we have strengthened our IRO oversight by ensuring all IROs have access to Reg 44 Visitor Reports, in preparation for children's reviews. This will enable the IRO to be aware of and raise any issues of concern identified within a report, and that this is reflected on the child's record.

Ofsted identified a strength in our undertaking of midway reviews, which is recognised as good practice. However, they noted there needs to be a greater focus and evidence of our understanding of the progress a child makes within their placement. In response to this we reviewed our midway review template, to enable us to better evidence our tracking of progress within placement, care plan and address any drift and delay in a timely manner.

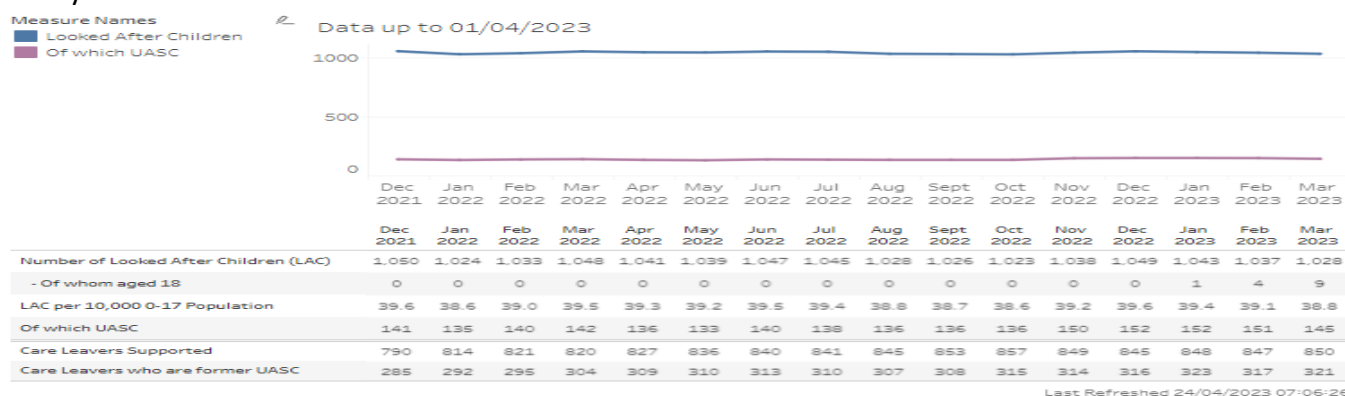
We also strengthened the reporting of concerns around practice and service delivery through our 'dispute resolution process' which we refer to as our 'alert process.' Alerts are now recorded within a child's electronic record, in LCS (Surrey Children's Service electronic recording system). This information pulls into a life dashboard within Tableau that any manager can access. We continue to report bi-monthly to the Director for Corporate Parenting and Corporate Parenting Board on alerts raised by IROs and key areas of success and good practice or areas of concern and improvement.

4. Our Looked After Children – demographics

At the end of March 2023 1, 028 children were looked after, and 850 Care Leavers were receiving support from Surrey. This is a decrease compared to 2021/22 and can be attributed to both fewer children becoming looked after and more children ceasing to be looked after.

4.1 The Number of Children Looked After

The tables below show there is overall an increasing number of children who need to be looked after by Surrey.



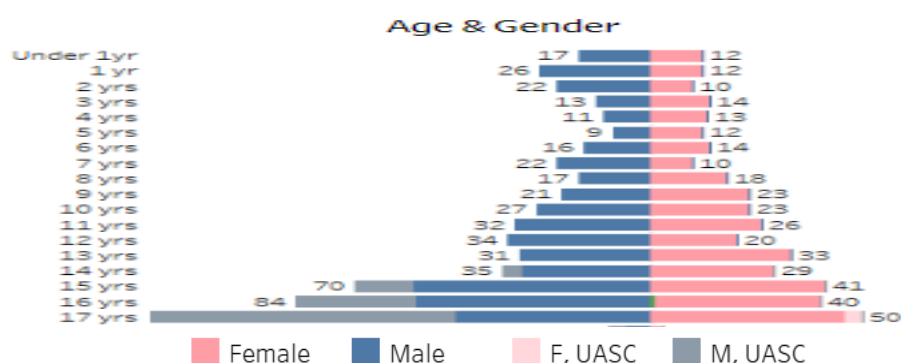
¹⁰ [Safeguarding children with disabilities in residential settings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

387 Children became looked after during the reporting year, which includes 104 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; and 406 children ceased to be looked after, which includes 102 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The children ceased to be looked after due variety of reasons, such as majority turning 18 and either living independently or in staying put arrangements; children being adopted or being permanently placed under Special Guardianship Orders; or children returned to the care of their birth parents or aged assessed as being over 18.

104 Children seeking asylum were accommodated by Surrey during 2022/23, which is less than the previous year, although the number overall of children seeking asylum who are being supported by Surrey remained similar to 2021/22. They equate to 26.8% of the total new care entries, which demonstrates the continuing demand projected.

4.2 The Age and Gender of Surrey's Looked After Children

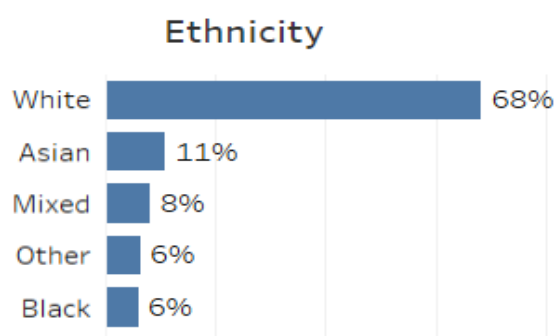
There has not been any meaningful change in the gender breakdown of Surrey's looked after children. 61% Children are male and 39% are female. For one child their gender was not recorded. There has been a slight increase of 1% in more males being looked compared to 2021/22. The increase in more males being looked after could be attributed to the increase of 16- and 17-year-old unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, as there are mainly boys within this cohort of children.



The age profile of children in Surrey has remained similar to last year and broadly in line with national figures. Our largest age group is those over 17 (182 children), but collectively our looked after children between the ages of 15 and 17 make up 40.5% (471 children) of our looked after population.

4.3 Ethnicity of Surrey's Looked After Children

The graph below shows the ethnicity of looked after children in Surrey.



Surrey's looked after children are predominantly White British (68%), with relatively small numbers from, Asian (11%), mixed (8%), Black (6%) and other (6%) backgrounds.

There has been a slight increase in the number of children becoming looked after from Asian ethnicity (+2%), whilst a slight drop in Other (-2%) and Mixed (-1%) ethnicity. For children from Black and White British ethnicity the % remained the same as 2021/22.

4.4 Independent Reviewing Service Performance

Once a child becomes looked after, their first review should take place within 20 working days, with the second review taking place within three months of the first review and the third and subsequent reviews are held within six months of the previous review. A child's review meeting can be completed as a single meeting or a series of meetings. The child should be central (taking into consideration age and ability) in making the decision on how they would like their review meeting to be held and who they would want to be part of it and present for the meeting. They may also choose to meet with their IRO separately and then for the rest of their network to meet without them; or have everyone together at the same time. If the review is held as a series of meetings, it must be completed within 20 working days from the initial to the final meeting.

IROs have 5 working days to complete their outcomes or recommendations from the child's Looked After Review and 15 working days to complete the review record (letter) following the completion of the review process.

Our performance in completing review records following a looked after review in timescale dropped significantly, down to 60% on average over the year. This is well below what we would want for our children, which would be 90% to be completed within timescale. There were a range of contributing factors to the delay which included staffing illness, blocks in the recording system due to delays of social work reports being completed. This prevented IROs completing their outcomes and minutes within the required timeframe, as well as capacity challenges for some staff due to increase number of looked after children and placement changes for some looked after children, which necessitated additional review meetings. Ensuring that outcomes and review records are consistently completed in timescales continues to be a key focus for improvement for the service.

IROs continue to evidence their footprint on children's records, completing Quality Assurance (QA) forms following reviews, providing commentary and analysis of areas such as quality of social work reports and recorded visits, as well as engagement with children in reviews.

As previously referenced, we reviewed and amended our midway review templates, to ensure more accurate qualitative evidence of progress for a child's care plan and progress within their placement. The aim of the midway review is to meet with the social worker (and anyone else the IRO feels would be relevant or beneficial to include) between review meetings, to track progress of the child's care plan, service delivery and progression to achieving good outcomes. Although an alert can be raised at any point when deemed necessary, a section has been included within the midway review template, if any cause of concern is identified during a midway discussion, which can prompt and direct the IRO to the alert template within LCS.

4.5 Timeliness of Review Meetings

Based on the service's logbooks & Tableau, IROs completed 2973 looked after reviews during 2022/23. This is a slight increase of 11 more reviews compared to 2021/22. This was despite having fewer children by the end of 2022/23. Changes in care plans or unplanned placement moved will necessitate an early review, which contributed to more review meetings being held despite fewer children in care, compared to 2021/22.

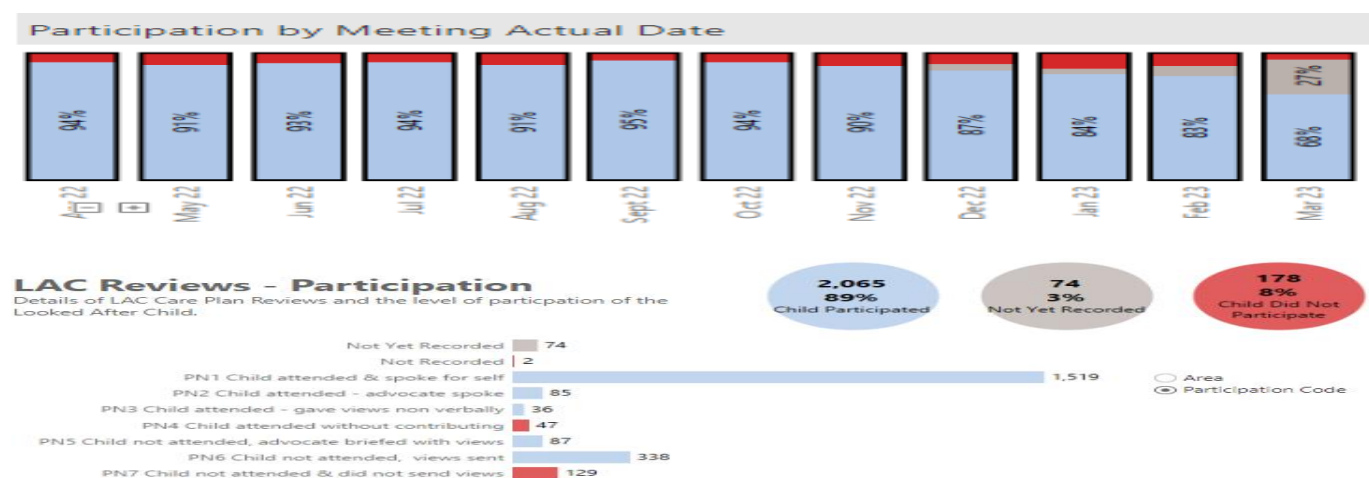
Reporting data indicates that 90% of all children's review meetings were held in time. For 104 children it indicated their reviews were overdue. Reviewing the data confirmed that for all but 8 children their reviews were held in timescale, although there has been a delay in their review meeting minutes being written up. This has been either due to IRO being delayed in completing the record of the meeting

within required timescale or they are unable to do so due to a block in the system due to a delay in the social worker's report being completed. Therefore, we again achieved 99% of reviews held in timescale, above our target of 90%.

For the 8 children whose reviews were held out of timescale, the delay ranged between 1 working day and longest 14 working days. The latter was due to availability of various attendees over the Christmas period. For the others, the delay was due to illness and attendee availability.

The timeliness of reviews, timeliness of completion and quality of review records continues to an area of improvement and is monitored through Service Coordinators' quality assurance oversight, through practice observations, reviewing in supervision and analysis in the monthly Quality Assurance Report completed by each Service Coordinator.

4.6 Participation of Children in their Looked After Child Reviews



Overall, 89% of children participated in their review meetings during 2022/2023. This is slight drop compared to 2021/22. The data above does not include children under the age of 4 who had their looked after reviews during the reporting year.

The 178 children for whom it was recorded that they did not attend and did not send reviews, a number were teenagers who did not wish to attend but met with their IROs separately. Some young people did not want to engage with their review or their IRO. Other children were not part of their meetings, assessed by their IRO and social worker that they would not manage the meeting, but the IRO saw them separately. For a considerable proportion they were children with disabilities. For some young people, the IROs had seen them separately but had not recorded their observation and what was shared by carers, as their independent view. A couple of young people were missing at the time of their review meetings. Further exploration of the data will be undertaken with IROs as to whether this recording is correct or whether their views were represented by others within the meeting but recorded incorrectly.

Children should be in charge, taking age and ability into consideration, as to how, where, when they want their looked after review meetings to be held. A review can be held in multiple ways, as a single meeting, hybrid meeting, face to face or virtual, considered by the IRO, social worker, child, and their network as to what the best way is for the child.

Surrey commissioned a new provider for our independent advocacy service, Reconstruct. Children are able to have an independent advocate to enable their participation in their meetings. For non-verbal or children who do not have the ability to consent to having an advocate, but for whom it is felt it would be in their best interest, a non-instructed advocate can be appointed. The advocacy service is currently

underutilised and IROs are encouraged to explore at each review with their child and through the social worker, whether the child would benefit and want an advocate. [The Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) highlighted the need for advocacy. The phase 2 report for [Safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings](#) recommended '*All children with disabilities and complex health needs should have access to independently commissioned, non-instructed advocacy from advocates with specialist training to actively safeguard children and respond to their communication and other needs*'.

4.7 Driving forward achieving permanence

IROs play a key role to ensure timely permanence is secured for looked after children. Whether this is returning safely to their parents' care, or where this is not possible, suitable family members or connected carers have been identified to ensure the child can continue to grow up within their family network, either through Special Guardianship or a Child Arrangement Order. Foster carers may consider permanency through Special Guardianship Order for a child as well. Where it has been assessed that the parents, family, or friends are unable to provide a long-term home for a child, permanency through either adoption or long-term fostering should be secured as timely as possible.

Consideration should also be given, where appropriate, whether reunification is possible within the family network when children have been in care for an extended period of time, and where family circumstance may have changed. The Reunification Team has attended team meetings to raise awareness. IROs encourage family group conferences to be held, to explore the child's network as early as possible, but also later on if reunification might be explored.

Service Coordinators further support achieving permanency for children in a timely through regular attendance at Permanency Planning Meetings (PPM) for children in Public Law Outline (PLO) and new to care (either through interim care order or S20). They also attend long-term PPMs which review children for whom legal permanency has been secured through full care order and where matching with long-term carers or placement with adopters once placement order has been granted, is tracked, and monitored. IROs feed into these meetings through their respective Service Coordinator and if there are any concerns re. drift and delay, this is raised.

As stated above, exploring family connections is a key priority, to ensure where possible children, for whom it has been assessed as not safe to return to their birth parents, could achieve permanency within their family or close connections through connected carers. Permanency for children is also reviewed through looked after review meetings, midways reviews and data obtained from completed QA forms completed by IROs. This is reported on monthly in the Service Coordinators QA reports.

5. Dispute Resolution Process

The [IRO handbook](#) requires the Local Authority to have an identified local 'Dispute Resolution Process' to raise concerns about a child's care planning with the operational teams. In Surrey CS, we call this our 'Alert Process.' The alert process will also be used to raise alerts and concerns with any partner agency where the IRO is of the view, they are not fulfilling their corporate parenting responsibilities.

There are 6 stages to the process, commencing with an informal alert, progressing to stage 1 with the Team Manager or equivalent management level in the agency. Stage 2 is to Service Manager or equivalent, Stage 3 Assistant Director, Stage 4 Director, Stage 5 Executive Director, and Stage 6 CAF/CASS.

The alert form was reviewed and embedded within LCS (the electronic recording system) and is completed directly within a child's file. If an alert needs to be raised with a partner agency, a paper version of the alert on the system will be completed and sent to the relevant agency.

5.1 Number and stage of alerts raised

During the past year, 524 alerts were raised for 501 children. This has been a significant increase in alerts raised, 134 more alerts compared to 2021/22. There was significant increase in alert being raised with team managers, from 129 up to 242. A slightly fewer informal alerts were raised, 182 compared to 191 alerts. There was also an increase in alerts at stage 2, Service Manager, from 53 to 87. However, a similar number of alerts were raised to stage 3, Assistant Director level, 12 compared to 13 during 2021/22. Only one alert was escalated to Director level compared to 4 in 2021/22. No alerts were raised at Stage 5 or 6. All alerts have now been resolved.

Stage	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Informal	11	30	14	9	16	20	19	14	8	17	4	20	<u>182</u>
Stage 1	13	22	8	20	8	9	19	38	19	42	12	32	<u>242</u>
Stage 2	4	7	10	5	8	8	7	7	5	10	11	5	<u>87</u>
Stage 3	3	0	0	3	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	<u>12</u>
Stage 4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<u>1</u>
Stage 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<u>0</u>
Stage 6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<u>0</u>
Total	<u>31</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>38</u>	<u>47</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>69</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>524</u>

5.2 Reasons for Alerts

Overall, the 524 alerts raised for 501 children were due to 714 different reasons (610 in 2021/22). An alert can be raised for multiple reasons. The majority of alerts were for a social work assessment report not being completed in timescale for the Looked After Child review (285), followed by the case drifting or a plan not being implemented in a timely way (127). 94 Alerts were raised due to LCS issues, whilst for 39 children visits were not completed within timescale. 45 Alerts were raised under the category or 'other' which could relate to alerts raised to SEND, Gateways to Resources, Deprivation of Liberty (DOLs), or other areas not covered in one of the reasons outlined below.

The number and reasons for alerts are analysed monthly through the QA Report produced by Service Coordinators for each quadrant, as well as bi-monthly reports to the Director for Corporate Parenting and Corporate Parenting Board.

Table 1 below contains the breakdown of the reasons for alerts being raised for during the reporting period. There has been a continued increase in alerts being raised, however timely raising of and resolution of concerns and drift and delay will remain a priority area of focus for the Independent Reviewing Service.

REASONS FOR ALERTS		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
A	Report/assessment has not been completed in time	10	33	14	7	12	18	30	41	27	38	17	38	<u>285</u>
B	Child's wishes and feelings contradict the care plan	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	<u>6</u>
C	IRO disagrees with LA care plan	0	0	2	3	2	1	4	2	1	0	2	0	<u>17</u>
D	Plan not implemented in a timely way	11	20	17	9	11	9	12	7	2	12	7	10	<u>127</u>
E	Assessments not thorough enough	0	2	2	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	<u>9</u>
F	Delay in PLO/legal gateway meetings taking place	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	<u>6</u>
G	Incomplete LCS issues causing drift and delay	10	4	6	10	5	3	1	19	4	17	3	12	<u>94</u>
H	Concerns the child's placement is not meeting their needs	3	7	2	0	1	1	3	6	0	2	2	1	<u>28</u>
I	The child or young person has not been visited in timescales and/or not seen alone	6	4	5	5	1	2	1	5	3	3	3	1	<u>39</u>
J	Health assessments/PEPs not completed in time	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	0	3	<u>15</u>
K	There are safeguarding issues which are not being address or resolved	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	1	1	<u>8</u>
L	The child is in immediate danger	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	<u>4</u>
M	Lack of permanency planning	0	7	4	2	4	0	1	3	0	1	0	0	<u>22</u>
N	Human rights may be being breached.	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	<u>7</u>
O	Other	3	11	4	5	6	7	8	1	0	0	0	2	<u>47</u>
	Total	<u>45</u>	<u>95</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>92</u>	<u>39</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>714</u>

5.3 Key areas of challenge and concern raised by the Independent Reviewing Service

Alongside raising areas of good practice and challenge for individual children by their IRO, over the past year the service have also raised some collective issues of challenge and concern with Children's Services, which include:

- Impact of staffing crisis within social work teams on timely progression of care plans and relationships with children. This also impacts on meaningful life story work being completed, and delays for some children in care proceedings.
- Ongoing timeliness of updating of care plans before a child's review meeting, to present to current and up to date care plan for the IRO to review
- Timeliness of completion of assessments/reports for children's reviews
- Allocation of personal advisors at age 16 and co-working of personal advisors with social workers in supporting young people to develop their independent living skills
- Challenges with placement sufficiency and matching of placements with children needing to come into care and children with complex needs.
- Pressure on social workers due to facilitating sibling and family time because of limitations on what Contact Centre can offer.
- Concerns remain due to the high level of emotional and mental health needs that many of our children in care have due to the trauma they have suffered, with limited services especially when placed outside of Surrey. In Surrey New Leaf is able to offer some intervention.
- Timely planning for children transitioning to Adults Services.

5.4 Impact of Independent Reviewing Officers

Evaluating impact is essential for all services, to consider areas of strengths and identify areas for improvement and understand the impact and effectiveness of the service. There is a range of methods to use to collate information to assist in evaluating impact such as alert process, feedback through complaints, feedback from service users, informal feedback shared by children and their network with IROs and their managers and so forth.

During the last year IROs as mentioned above, through the scrutiny of children's care plans and service delivery for our looked after children, identified drift, and delay, as well as other areas of service delivery concerns, alerts were raised for 501 children. All these alerts have been addressed successfully. Without the oversight of the IRO bringing these issues to the local authority's attention, the drift and delay or child's voice not being heard, could have gone unnoticed or unchallenged. Through the raising of the alerts, care plans have been progressed, new placements that more appropriately meet the children's needs had been found, proceedings issued, and permanency achieved for children where there was delay in the system.

There had only been one complaint following a looked after review, although the family within the complaint praised the IRO for her support and how she had worked with them and supported the children for the past 5 years. Part of their upset was that the IRO was moving on and would no longer be the children's IRO and the presence of consistency that she had offered, as there had been multiple changes in social workers for the children.

The Independent Reviewing Service continues to be one of the more stable and consistent services for our looked after children, with limited turnover in staff and few agency workers within the service.

As previously stated, we have reviewed and are revamping our feedback form, which will assist us in identifying areas of strength and impact, as well as areas for further improvement. We hope to launch the revised form by June 2023.

Below are some of the examples of commentary or reflections received on the positive impact of an IRO:

“Feedback from a team manager: I have been meaning to send you this compliment for the IRO G for ages. I just wanted to say that her letter to IH and the CLA minutes were so brilliant and really child focused. So much so that I used a lot of the information to complete IH’s CPR. Unfortunately, IH’s SW was off sick when we needed to complete the CPR and as the TM, I hadn’t met IH so Having the IRO’s letter and detailed information really brought IH alive to me and I felt because of that I was able to write about IH as though I had met her... It also means that when IH is older and looks back at this it is very much written to her and is about her... Thanks again the IRO G for taking the time to write in this way and ensure our children are the very focus of our work.”

“Feedback for a team manager: Hi J I just wanted to feedback to you after I had supervision with the allocated SW that we believe the supportive attitude of IRO J towards HD at the review helped HD (amongst other things) to make a turnaround and she is now in a much happier and more focused place again.”

“Feedback from a social worker: For being so kind during times of stress – and reminding me that the job is hard but still being strengths-based. It is appreciated.”

“Feedback from a student social worker:....I liked how you acknowledged that KQM can feel anxious and overwhelmed with many professionals in the room as the new professionals working with KQM may not have known this. I also liked that you let KQM know she was free to leave the room at any point if she became overwhelmed. This is something that I may not have thought of doing and I will remember this in my future practice! I also thought it was a nice touch giving KQM praise and asking professionals what they thought KQM had done well recently. I feel as though this can easily be forgotten by professionals, especially when there is often a change in the professional network.

You appropriately adjusted your tone throughout the review and acknowledged KQM’s views and opinions. It did not feel like a tick box review in the sense that there was opportunity for discussion. One final comment is that I thought the review lasted an appropriate length of time in consideration to KQM’S needs ☺”

“Feedback from Hope Service Coordinator - Just a quick note to thank you for the review yesterday. Thought I should write to reflect on the lovely, warm, and intimate environment you helped create. This gave M the trust and platform to share some of her most difficult experiences and thoughts; a wonderful example of child focused practice.”

5.5 Examples of good social work practice

Below are some examples of good practice and feedback shared by young people, IROs, parents, carers, professionals of work completed by social workers:

“Feedback from a mother via IRO - I’ve just spoken with J’s mother, C, as part of J’s review meeting and she shared that she is really enjoying working with social worker E. E keeps her updated and she feels E is proactive in getting things done for J. C likes that you are preparing to do life story work with J and not

rusting it. ... and this is a good example of keeping parents involved within the Child Looked After process."

"Feedback from an IRO: JR has been a sensitive and sad case but due to the social worker JC's tenacity including finding father and organising many things to enable, we hope, a return home a positive ending is now in sight."

"Feedback from a parent re. reunification worker: I would like to start with a huge congratulations to one of your members of staff namely SC. She is a real credit to your team. She is reliable, informative, and extremely proactive. She is basically like a tin of RONSEAL, does exactly what it says on the tin" If I ask her a question and she does not know or have the answer, she will investigate further and ask the right people to get an answer. It may not be the answer I want to hear neither the less she gets things done. S is working with my daughter, my parents and myself. S has been great for emotional support and to help me with my daughter's extremely fragile mental health."

"Feedback from an Independent Fostering Agency: Dear E, I just want to extend our thanks to you. You are a simply fantastic at your role and it is a complete pleasure to work so closely with you and we value your support in helping us take care of all your lovely and amazing girls. I am so pleased that she has such strong advocates in you and L. I will say it again, but you are a truly are 'rare gem' in the social work field so thank you."

"Feedback from an IRO: ... the social worker commended for enabling contact between a young person and her father who is serving a prison sentence for life. The young person had not seen her father since a baby and has always felt that she has no family as her mother is deceased. This has had a significant impact on the young person's emotional well-being and physical health. "

"Feedback from an IRO: ...'A' had worked really well with a young person, worked to understand his emotional needs and think about how to manage his family time and the impact on him, alongside working really well with his carers."

"Feedback from an auditor: AM seemed very passionate about getting the right plan for CH. She was very reflective, creative and trauma informed in her practice during our audit discussion. AM has indeed grasped key issues and in a short space of time has ensure CH has been seen and significant worries addressed promptly."

"Feedback from a parent: AA is a pleasure to work with and the only social worker who I have seen G really connect with. AA has a good balance of challenging G in a way he understands and is helpful to him. I have felt supported in meetings with other professionals and seen AA respectfully challenge all parties if she is not in agreement or not understanding the point of view, including mine. AA has G's best interest and I feel reassured by this. I have found the support from social care for G and I really positive. AA is open and honest with me without Judgement. AA is very professional and the best I have seen G respond to any of his social workers, I feel very comfortable with her."

"Feedback from a young person: I felt totally understood by E not at one point did she make me feel confused or angry she has a very good understanding on how my life has gone so far and knowing that has made her more clued up on how to speak with me and interact with me! ...I am totally happy with my social worker nothing will ever change that so far she has done more than any other social worker who has worked with me throughout the whole time me living at my nans and I appreciate all the help she has given so far! ... she likes to always make sure I have input in any conversations where I'm involved so I get my point across and get things sorted out! ..."

6. Summary and key areas of focus for the service for the coming year include:

The year continued to be extremely busy, completing nearly 3000 reviews plus all associated quality assurance functions and expectations for IROs. This, alongside some significant staff illness had impacted on our performance. We are now again at a full complement of staff and working on balancing workload across the four teams, to ensure staff have sufficient capacity to meet all our practice expectations.

Despite the periods of staff illness, the service continued to give consistency and continuity to our children in care through their IRO relationship.

We review our Service Plan to ensure we keep on track with our identified areas of improvement and focus. Many key areas will continue to be our focus into 2023/24, aligned to the overarching Directorate Business Plan .

Key areas of focus for 2023/2024 include:

- Promote active participation of children in their reviews to ensure their views are shared and listened to, which will include collaborating with User Voice and Participation to promote the use of independent support and advocacy.
- Improve in participation of children in their reviews, in particular children with disabilities and teenagers.
- Strengthen the links between the service and Children with Disabilities Service to ensure that intervention for children are robust in particular for our children who are non-verbal and that their reports evidence the range of communications and methods of intervention that are used to promote their views, wishes and feelings and evidence their voice.
- Introduce new feedback form to gain views of our children, their families, carers, and professional network to improve service delivery
- Provide consistent and effective challenge to practice through alerts by keeping the child's needs at the centre of our interventions and actions.
- Increase performance in completion of midway meetings, QA forms and oversight completed and recorded in a timely manner on children & young people's case records.
- Collaborate with operational colleagues to ensure quality assuring assessments and reports for reviews accurately reflect the child and family's identity and this is taken into consideration in assessment and service delivery.
- Be part of development and delivery of induction and multi-agency partnership training for looked after children processes, including review meetings.
- Further work to be done on developing links with Youth Justice Service, to establish a link IRO or YJS/Looked After Champion. This is an outstanding piece of work.
- Improve in performance in timeliness of completion of outcomes and letters/minutes following looked after reviews.

Linde Webber
Service Manager, Quality Assurance,
03/05/2023
