



Annual Report Independent Reviewing Service 2020/21

London Borough of Southwark
Children and Families Services

Report of: Clare Ryan, Quality Assurance, Children & Families, Children's and Adults' Services

Accountable Head of Service: Karen Neill, Head of Quality Assurance and Practice Development, Children & Families, Children's and Adults' Services

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Summary to year end 2021

- Numbers of looked after children in Southwark decreased from 458 to 449 between 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2020/21 (2% decrease)
- There were also reductions in children entering and ceasing care in Southwark the same time period (19% and 26% decreases respectively)¹
- There was a decrease in the total number of reviews (of children's care plans) held in the year (n= 1278 vs 1264, meaning 14 less reviews in the year)
- Timeliness of children and young people's reviews improved by 5% to the year-end 2021.
- Ninety six percent of children and young people over 4 years old participated in some way in their review and 4% did not.
- Of the 4% of reviews held with no participation from children (n=39), 6 reviews were for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. There will be continued focus throughout 2021/22 to ensure that reviews are child centred and children are given every opportunity to participate.
- The number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children decreased by 8 to the year-end 2021 (however, there has been a more significant increase from May to August 2021 with an additional 31 UASC entering care, 29 of which were 16 years old and above)
- The proportion of children who are of Black or Black British ethnicity and were looked after during 2020/21 is 45% for Southwark. This means IROs need particular skills when reviewing the cultural, emotional and health needs of these children and young people who are likely to be more sociologically and economically disadvantaged.²
- Placement stability for children in care has improved.
- IROs made 95 formal escalations about children to operational managers.³

¹ This is percentage decreases between year end figures 2019/20 vs 2020/21

² See Research in Practice, '[Understanding the lived experiences of black and ethnic minority children and families.](#)'

³ Escalations are governed by the protocol contained in [online policies and procedures](#). Escalations occur when the initial case alert remains unresolved. IROs can refer an escalation to CAF/CASS at any time but must notify the Head of Service for QA who in turn will inform the Assistant Director and the Director for CSC.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this annual report is to provide an overview of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Service for Looked After Children between 1 April 2020 to the 31 March 2021. This report is required by statutory guidance (see 1.3 below and 7.11 of the IRO Handbook, 2010) and seeks to analyse and evaluate practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children. The report is also intended to review the effectiveness of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service in ensuring that the Local Authority discharges its statutory and corporate parenting responsibilities well towards those children who are looked after.
- 1.2 This annual report provides qualitative and quantitative information about the service provided in 2020/21, and also sets-out the priorities for 2021/22 to further improve the effectiveness of the service.

Legal Context and Purpose of Service

- 1.3 The Independent Review Officers Service is set within the framework of the [IRO Handbook \(Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010\)](#) reflects statutory regulation, the [Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2010](#).
- 1.4 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) have a critical and statutory role in relation to the improvement of care planning for looked after children. The responsibility of the IRO is to have an overview of the child's care planning arrangements and of the child's wellbeing in placement. IROs achieve this primarily through chairing multi-agency reviews of children's care plans and will have a strong focus on plans for children's futures, as well as oversight of the child's health and education. The IRO must offer constructive and targeted scrutiny and challenge regarding case management and care planning through regular review and monitoring and follow up between children's reviews as appropriate to the child's needs and circumstances.

Functions & Duties of the IRO Service

- 1.5 The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that 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.⁴ The IRO Service must have strong oversight of all care planning for children and young people throughout their time experiencing care services, notably at the key transition points where children and young people are entering and leaving care. This is in order to ensure that children and young people's needs are well identified and defined, and that the planning of service delivery is proportionate, impactful and effective in a positive way, and without delay.

⁴ [IRO Handbook, 2.10](#)

1.6 To achieve the above, the IRO Service is expected to:

- Ensure that **the care plan is based on a detailed and up-to-date assessment of the child's needs**, and sets out realistic and effective actions to meet those needs, within an appropriate timescale for the child;
- **Identify any gaps** in the assessment process or provision of services, and notify the corporate parent about the implications of this for the child;
- Ensure that the **child's voice is heard**, their views, wishes and feelings are given full consideration and weight and, as appropriate, the child fully understands their care plan and the implications of any proposed changes to it;
- Ensure that the **child understands how an advocate could help**, their entitlement to advocacy, and that a referral to an advocate is made if necessary;
- **Consult** with and involve the child's parents, as well as other significant adults in the **family and professional networks**;
- Ensure any **safeguarding issues are identified** and addressed;
- **Challenge robustly any drift or delay** in the progress of the child's care plan, or the delivery of services to them;
- Ensure that **formal statutory reviews are held and recorded** within timescales set out by statutory guidance;
- **Monitor the local authority's actions** in between the review meetings, to make sure that progress is being made to achieve the outcomes for the child as set-out in their care plan, and to act on any concerns about drift or delay;
- **Take appropriate action** if the local authority fails to comply with regulations, or is in breach of its duties to the child in any material way, including making a referral to Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS).

Service Overview

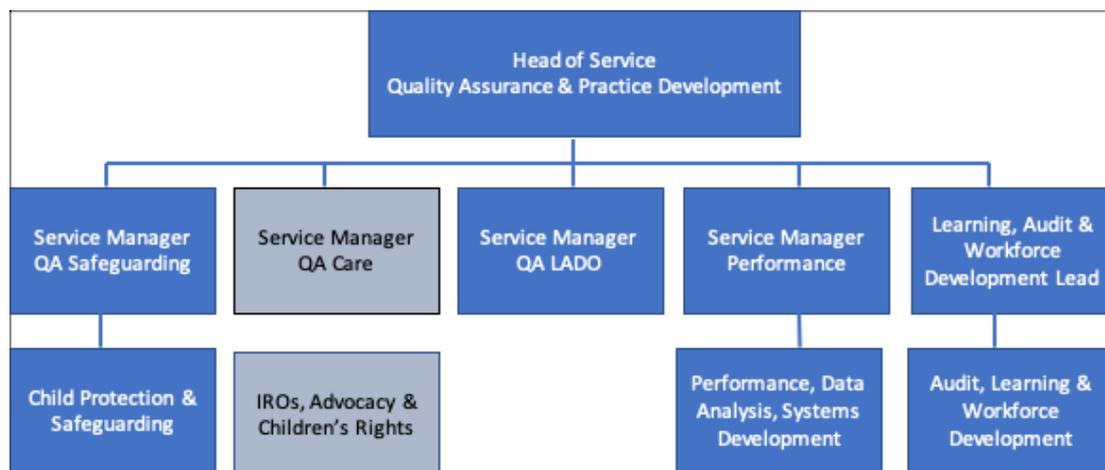


Fig 1

- 1.7 Figure 1 above shows the IRO Service (highlighted) within the wider service structure for Quality Assurance and Practice Development. The Service Manager for Quality Assurance (Care) is responsible for the direct line management of the IRO Service provided by IROs and also has management responsibility for the provision of advocacy and children and young people's participation (for those receiving children who are looked after by the local authority).
- 1.8 The Service benefits from close links to Care Services (0-15) and Care Leaver Service (16 plus), the Virtual School and Head and other services within the Quality Assurance and Practice Development area including those responsible for audit and learning. Stronger and more collaborative work has been developed throughout 2021 particularly with the Extra Familial Harm Service and with the QA Safeguarding Service (Child Protection Conferencing). This is to ensure that there is continued IRO oversight at the point that this is required for children and young people's experiences of services provided to them.
- 1.9 Administrative support is provided by a fulltime executive officer managed by the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) Administration Manager. IROs are responsible with social workers for arranging looked after review meetings, and also for recording all review meetings. There is administrative capacity for the distribution of care plans and IRO reports to the professional network. Social workers are tasked with sending out consultation documents and sharing plans and IRO reports with children and parents.

- 1.10 The Southwark IRO Service is staffed by permanent and locum staff (3 x permanent and 3 x locum). The Service will at times make use of sessional staff and additional capacity and freelance IROs whenever there is a need to ensure capacity to function within statutory regulation. For example, when there has been a rapid increase in numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children requiring a service from the local authority during summer 2021.
- 1.11 The IRO Service has been largely stable over the 12 months to April 2021, although there have been changes to the management of the Service throughout 2020/21 due to unforeseen circumstances. This has been resolved more recently with the appointment of a permanent Service Manager. The new Service Manager has worked for Southwark within Care Services for some years and thus is very familiar with our looked after children.
- 1.12 Nearly 70% of children receiving care services are allocated to the full time IROs and approximately 30% are allocated to those who are sessional IROs. There has been a recent increased use of sessional IROs due to growing numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children entering the care of Southwark, and to afford the Service the flexibility it requires. This ensures immediate IRO oversight for this particularly vulnerable and often traumatised group of children and young people. However, in 2021/22 we will be seeking to reduce the use of agency and sessional staff and recruit permanent IROs.
- 1.13 Black men continue to be unrepresented in the profile of our IRO service, although there are 5 Black women. We will seek to address this in 2021/22 to address diversity in the Service. Habitually and in line with expectations, the IROs consider and promote the specific cultural and identity needs of children and young people through the review of their care plans.
- 1.15 All IROs have at least five years post-qualifying experience as a social worker and are registered with Social Work England. IROs have previously held managerial roles in other services and have had experience of oversight within safeguarding services as well as services to looked after children.
- 1.16 Some of Southwark's IROs have known children on their caseloads for almost the whole of their life (children now in their early teens who came into care as very young children, e.g. under 6mths old). Often, IROs are the consistent professionals in children's lives and as such, hold a wealth of knowledge about them.

Text message to IRO from a Connected Carer

'I feel you genuinely care for my grandchildren, that means a lot to me. You have a 'good heart'.'

Caseloads

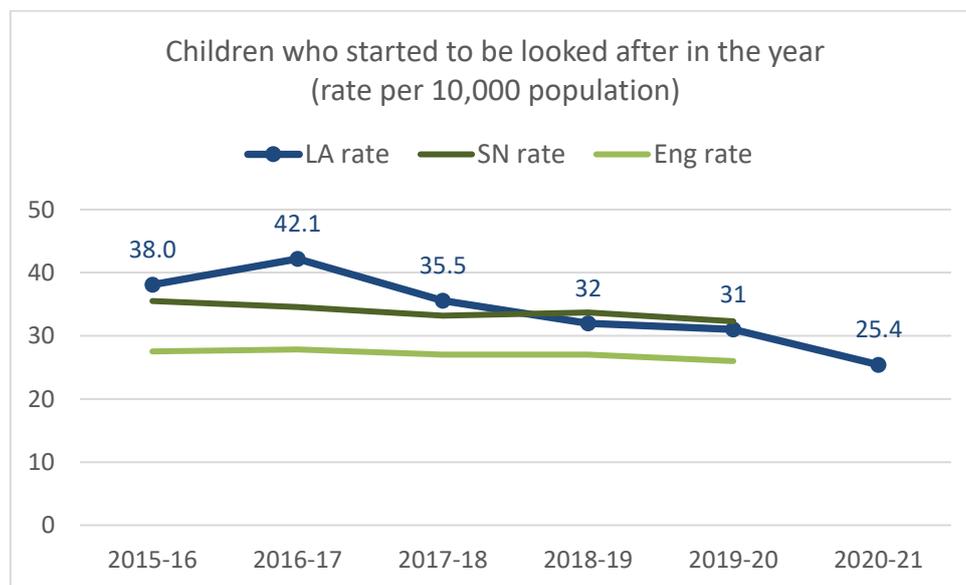
- 1.17 IROs' caseloads in Southwark are within those limits recommended in guidance (see 7.13 to 7.15 of the IRO Handbook). The recommended average caseload is between 50 and 70 looked after children. The average caseload an IRO holds in Southwark is approximately 40 to 50 children. Full time and permanent IROs can hold up to 60 cases. The highest currently is 55. The workload for an IRO may also be considered in relation taken to travel to placements as well as the complexity of issues for each child. Children and families whose origins are in other countries may need additional time in the care planning and review process to properly explore their cultural needs, as well as additional time for interpretation.
- 1.18 Despite the challenges of the global pandemic and several lockdown measures introduced by national Government in 2020/21, the IRO Service has been innovative in its use of technology and software to stay in touch with children young people via online face to face and the use of various software applications such as WhatsApp, Skype and FaceTime. IROs had to overcome difficulties with technologies to conduct reviews remotely during lockdowns, however, children and young people were very familiar with the applications used and often preferred this method of interaction.

Multi-agency Liaison & Quality Assurance

- 1.19 The Head of Service for Quality Assurance and Practice Development directly line manages the Service Manager for the IRO Service. As stated, recent changes to this role were firstly necessitated by unfortunate circumstances (the loss of the previous Service Manager), until more recently when a permanent Service Manager was appointed.
- 1.20 The Head of Southwark's Virtual School has previously attended IRO team meetings to discuss educational provision, personal education plans (PEPs) for children and how these are monitored through review and to highlight key areas for IRO attention such as achievement at KS5. Health Leads such as the Nurse for children in care also routinely attend IRO team meetings to ensure health outcomes for children in care are actively monitored. The outbreak of Covid 19 impacted closer liaison in 2020/21, however, usual networking meetings have resumed. In 2021/22, there will be improved collaborative working with the in-house Clinical Service and PAUSE (for parents whose children have been placed in care).

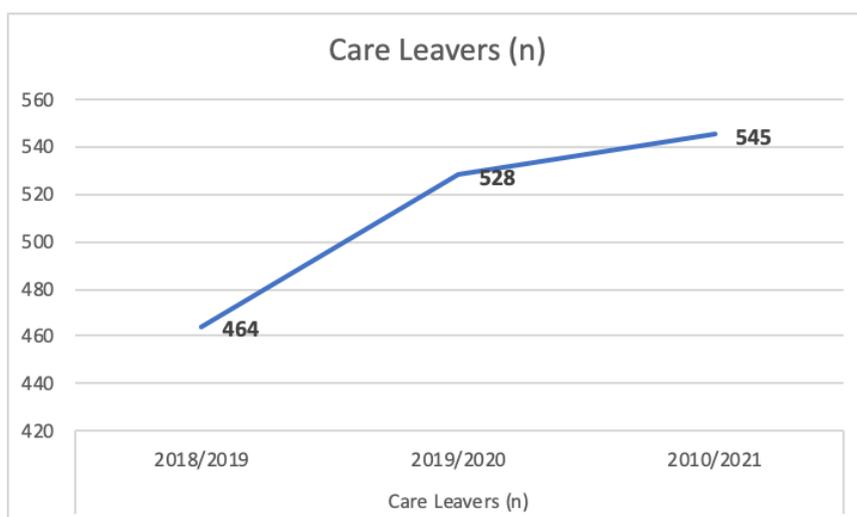
- 1.21 Similarly, CAFCASS liaison had been impacted by the pandemic and the loss of the previous Service Manager in 2021, however, IROs remain in close contact with Children's Guardians and have electronic access to legal bundles to ensure oversight of children's cases where these are in proceedings.
- 1.22 The IRO Service Manager attends the Extra Familial Harm Panel, the Missing Panel and the Multi Agency Complex Cases Panel.
- 1.23 IROs regularly participate in monthly and thematic case audit and the Service Manager attends monthly performance meetings for the Care and Care Leaver (16+) Services. In March 2021 IROs were consulted and gave their views on a review of residential placements commissioned by Southwark Children and Families Service. IROs expressed the view that, when settings are well maintained and well located, young people are far more likely to be positive about living there.

2. Profile of Southwark's Children & Young People



Graph1
Source: SSDA903

- 2.1 The graph above relates to the rates of children starting to be looked after over the year and compares Southwark's rate of children entering care with our statistical neighbours and the national rate. Southwark's rate is a downward trend, and this has some similarities to other boroughs it is also due to children and families being supported at an earlier stage by the Keeping Families Together (Family Early Help) and through the Children and Families Social Work Service. This in turn means more children and families receiving support at the right time to prevent children becoming looked after.
- 2.2 For IROs, the downward rate of children entering care results in more manageable caseloads (as previously evidenced at 1.17) and improved oversight, allowing time for attendance at other key meetings for children (such as Permanency & Placement Planning Meetings and Professionals Meetings). This then means a greater focus on collaborative working across Southwark's services and with other agencies (schools, primary, community and acute health care, CAMHs etc)



Graph 2
Source: SSDA903

2.3 The graph above (Graph 2) shows the numbers of children leaving care by year (2018 to year end 2021). Each year the numbers of young people leaving care has increased (approximately 15% increase, n= 81). IROs have oversight of pathway planning for young people as they approach leaving care age and liaise closely with the 16+ Services. The 16+ Service is in touch with approximately 98% of care leavers aged between 19 and 21 years. were in touch with the service and audit work has demonstrated that staying touch and forming trusted relationships for Care Leavers is a particular strength.

No. & Rate of Children Looked After (CLA)	SNs 2019/20	Southwark 2019/20	Southwark 2020/21
CLA as at 31 st March (n)	361	458	449
CLA as at 31 st March per 10,000	61	70	69
CLA starting to 31 st March (n)	179	204	166
CLA ceasing to 31 st March (n)	177	222	167

Table 1
Source: SSDA903

2.4 The table above (Table 1) shows children in care as at the 31st of March by number and rate as well as the numbers starting and ceasing to be looked after in the year. The table below (Table 2) shows the proportions of children in care by ethnicity.

- 2.5 Children who are of Black or Black British are over represented compared to the borough population amongst our children in care (45% for 2020/21). There are no published mid-year population estimates by ethnicity and age for London boroughs. The published comparative data (for whole population) comes from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) estimates for 2019. This shows that for all under 19 year olds in Southwark’s population, 40.1% and 13.1% of children and young people were of Black and mixed ethnicity respectively. Southwark’s looked after children population was 45% and 20% respectively by comparison.
- 2.6 The proportion children and young people looked after by Southwark who are Black or Black British ethnicity is almost equal to the proportions of children of White and mixed ethnicities combined.
- 2.7 The proportion of children who are of White or Asian ethnicity who are looked after by Southwark is lower than both our statistical neighbours and the inner London averages, similarly for children and young people of other ethnicity.
- 2.8 It is important to understand that disproportionality for children in care solely on the basis of ethnicity does not acknowledge the intersectionality of deprivation as a key factor⁵.
- 2.9 Young people had previously highlighted with Councillors at a Corporate Parenting meeting in July 2020, their concerns about the impact of Covid upon those who were of Black and minority ethnicity. Throughout the pandemic, social workers and IROs have sought to support children and young people, carers and settings with these concerns, ensuring that the right protections are in place for them to keep safe and well.

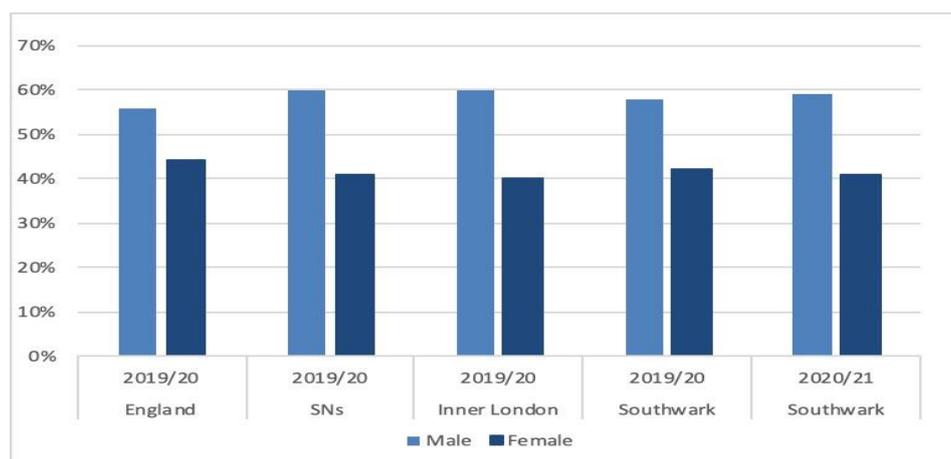
Children by Ethnicity %	England 2019/20	SNs 2019/20	Inner London 2019/20	Southwark 2019/20	Southwark 2020/21
White	74	33	35	25	26
Mixed	10	18	17	17	20
Asian or Asian British	4	9	10	5	5
Black or Black British	7	37	30	48	45
Other ethnic groups	4	6	7	5	4

Table 2
Source: SSDA903

ONS Estimates for 2019 Southwark 0-18s (%)				
White	Mixed	Asian	Black	Other
35.5	13.1	7.8	40.1	3.5

⁵ Inequalities in child welfare intervention rates: the intersection of deprivation and identity Bywaters et al 2014 Child welfare Inequalities Project, Coventry University

- 2.10 This is significant for the IRO Service. The professional development, and the profile of the IRO Service, should keep pace with the needs and profile of our children and young people. IROs must be well informed of children’s cultural needs and monitoring activities and children’s reviews must reflect their needs around health, skin and hair care as well as dietary needs.
- 2.11 Through Southwark Stands Together (SST), the Council has made a commitment to ensuring that Southwark’s staffing profile at senior levels is reflective of the local population, and to promote equality and diversity at all levels. Similarly, a commitment is made to make our IRO Service reflective of children and young people’s ethnicity, and knowledgeable and responsive to their cultural and emotional needs. Achieving and maintaining a sense of security in care may be more difficult for children and young people of Black, minority ethnic and multiple heritage backgrounds, and for unaccompanied asylum seekers. These children and young people may face racism, discrimination and isolation which can challenge their ability to develop resilience and high self-esteem.
- 2.12 A bespoke and mandatory training programme is in development will be made available in 2021/22 to all social work staff, inclusive of IROs which will cover racism, anti-discriminatory practice, black history and reducing inequalities.
- 2.13 There is also continued developmental work on Life Long Links and ReConnect programmes to safely support children in care to establish meaningful links with people who are important to them and offer them insight into their history, culture and identity.⁶
- 2.14 The graph below (Graph 3) shows the gender of children and young people which remains comparable to statistical neighbours, inner London. As with our statistical neighbours, more male children than female receive care services.



Graph 3
Source: SSDA903

⁶ Lifelong Links aims to ensure that children in care have positive support networks around them to help them during their time in care and into adulthood.

- 2.15 Southwark’s looked after children are proportionately older than our statistical neighbours and the inner London averages. The highest proportion are aged between 10 to 15 years (44% at end of 2019/20). The proportion of children who are aged under 10 years old is more or less comparable to both our statistical neighbours and the inner London averages.
- 2.16 Strong IRO oversight of care plans for very young children coming into care is crucial if the plan is to return children home where this is assessed as a realistic possibility. Many of our young children’s parents and carers are affected by issues such as domestic abuse and violence, substance and alcohol use, and or mental health issues. Often, these issues are not resolved for children and they remain in care, therefore, securing permanency early on at the initial and second reviews for these children becomes critical.
- 2.17 Permanency for children can be achieved in a number of ways. Children can be matched for adoption or matched for long term foster care. Children can also be placed with someone who is connected or related to the child or children (Connected Carers).

Children by age %	England 2019/20	SNs 2019/20	Inner London 2019/20	Southwark 2019/20	Southwark 2020/21
Under 1	5	4	4	4	4
1 to 4	14	9	9	6	9
5 to 9	18	12	12	13	11
10 to 15	39	38	38	45	44
16 and over	24	36	37	32	32

Table 3
Source: SSDA903

3. Outcomes & Performance

Stability of Care

- 3.1 IROs have a significant role in supporting children to remain in placement and in ensuring that they are in the right type of placement to meet their needs (stability of care). Stability of children's placements has improved over the last year with fewer children experiencing placement moves (a decrease of 7% compared with the previous year, and now comparable with other boroughs) and more children remaining in the same placement for longer (see Table 4 below).
- 3.2 Where children were living (by placement type) as at the end of year 2021 is shown in the table below (Table 4). Some comparative information on placement type is unavailable, for example, permanent foster placement information. Southwark has a higher proportion of children in foster care than our statistical neighbours and inner London averages, and a good proportion of placements for children are with permanent foster carers.⁷ It is deemed preferable for children to be placed with families rather than in a residential setting. However, for some children and young people, a residential setting may be more conducive to their needs.
- 3.3 Recent audit work completed with the Care Service has shown that children in long term stable placements with committed carers do very well at school and socially. This was also the case for another young person in a very effective residential placement. Consistency in social worker necessitated an auditor to comment on how well this child had been 'held in mind and his needs responded to'.
- 3.4 During the focused visit by HM Inspector (Ofsted) in September 2020, sufficiency of placements for older children with complex and high needs was highlighted as an area for improvement. Southwark joined the [Commissioning Alliance](#) in 2020 to support work on sufficiency of placements and developing capacity within and in the proximity of the Borough is a high priority.

From Case Audit 2021

'Planning is graded particularly highly, with good permanency planning evident in most cases and good IRO input evident on case files. Further improvement could be achieved with more attention to Placement Planning and ensuring associated LAC Review recommendations are tracked in supervisions.'

⁷ The number of long-term fostering matches increased from 22 (2019/20) to 41 in 2020/21.

Children by Placement Type	England 2019/20	SNs 2019/20	Inner London 2019/20	Southwark 2019/20	Southwark 2020/21
Foster placements	72%	74%	71%	78%	76%
Concurrent planning foster placements	-	-	-	-	0.9%
Foster placements with connected carers	-	-	-	-	19%
Foster placements confirmed as permanent	-	-	-	-	43%
Placed for adoption	3%	1%	2%	-	1.3%
Placement with parents	7%	4%	2%	2%	2%
Other placement in the community	3%	4%	3%	-	0.2%
Children's homes, secure units and hostels	13%	15%	20%	17%	18%
Other residential settings	2%	3%	2%	2%	1.8%
Other placements	1%	0%	-	-	0.2%

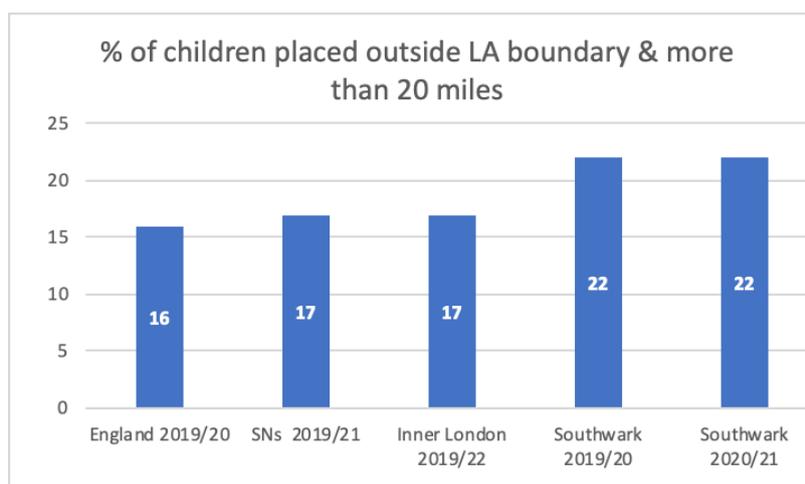
Table 4 Source: SSDA903

Stability of Care	England 2019/20	SNs 2019/20	Inner London 2019/20	Southwark 2019/20	Southwark 2020/21
% of children with 3+ placements	11	10	11	17	10
% of children in care for 2.5 years in placement for 2 years +	68	71	70	65	71

Table 5 Source: SSDA903

- 3.5 Wherever possible, children and young people should be placed to live close to their families for obvious reasons. The graph below (Graph 7) shows the proportion of children in care at the end of the year placed more than 20 miles from their home. For Southwark's children and young people, this is above both the England, inner London and statistical neighbours' average. This can also impact on IROs' time to perform other key duties and tasks if they have to travel extensively to where children are living to conduct reviews.
- 3.6 Moreover, last year's Bright Spots Survey with children and young people found that of those children who participated in the survey, 12% of 11 to 18 year olds had had 5 or more placements since coming into care.⁸ Therefore, despite the improvements shown at Table 5, some children and young people are still experiencing too many changes to where they live.
- 3.7 To monitor this and to support children and young people better, the IRO Service will be looking at ways to identify earlier where placements are becoming unstable and to improve how this information is collated to provide improved quality assurance of all children's placements.

⁸ The Bright Spots Survey is commissioned for Southwark via Coram and includes core well-being measures to compare children in cares' well-being to children and young people in the general population.



Graph 7
Source: SSDA903

- 3.8 As stated, IROs have a statutory role in seeking to improve outcomes for children in Southwark’s care. This includes ensuring that children have an initial health assessment in good time, and that they then have an up to date annual health assessment and developmental checks, and that their mental health and wellbeing is monitored and addressed.
- 3.9 Whilst the majority of children and young people have an up to date annual health assessment (97% as at the end of year 2021), the timeliness of initial health assessments requires improvement.
- 3.10 Children’s access to timely dental checks has been and remains an area significantly impacted by the pandemic and has dropped significantly (from 82% to 30%). The vast majority of children in care have a contemporary SDQ score (94%), but these indicators of emotional and behavioural health need should be consistently evident in children’s care plans. However, there is embedded clinical capacity (for children’s mental health needs) available to Southwark’s children as well as a Virtual Mental Health Lead exclusive to children and young people in care.
- 3.11 Audits continue to show that IROs are addressing health assessments in reviews to inform review recommendations. SDQ results need to be used better to inform care plans and reviews. Audits indicate that SDQs are completed, but social workers and IROs must relate the findings more explicitly to the child’s care plan.

Outcomes for Children Looked After	England 2019/20	SNs 2019/20	Inner London 2019/20	Southwark 2019/20	Southwark 2020/21
% of children whose immunisations were up to date	88	78	80	91	86
% of children who had their teeth checked by a dentist	86	81	84	82	30
% of children who had their annual health assessment	90	92	92	98	97
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores	14	13	13	14.1	13.8

Table 8
Source: SSDA903

Educational Achievement & Attainment

3.12 The IRO Service is instrumental in supporting and improving the completion and quality of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for children and young people, and in monitoring and tracking attainment and achievement outcomes. A PEP should be started within 10 days of a child becoming looked after and their plan must be in place by their first review. PEP documents include:

- Strengths and achievements
- Views of the student
- SMART academic targets
- Current and target attainment data

3.13 The Virtual Head reported that children's average attainment scores improved from 17.1% to 26.2% in 2020, which compares favourably to 21% nationally, and that 32.4% of our looked after children achieved a 9-4 pass in English and Maths in 2020, an increase of 12.4% from the previous year.⁹

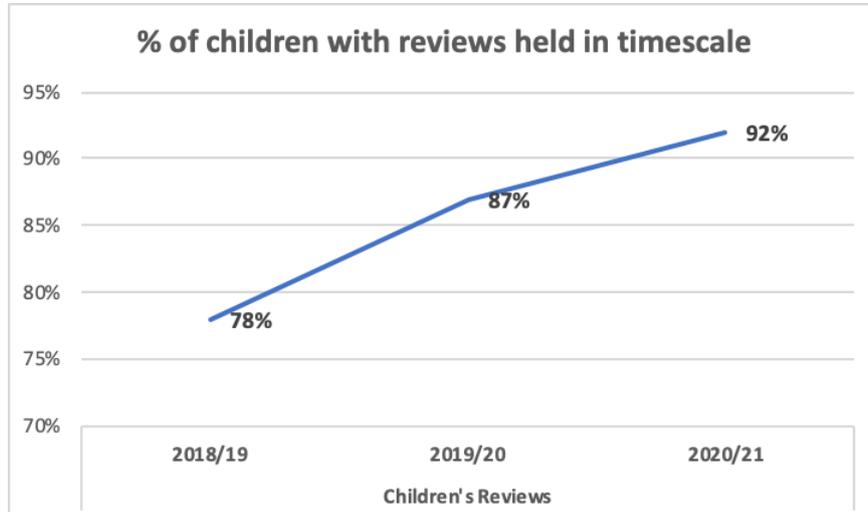
⁹ Annual Report from Virtual School, Corporate Parenting Committee, 2020

Children & Young People's Reviews

From a parent to an IRO

'We wanted to say a huge thank you for all your support of A, and of the family as a whole over the last year.....your professionalism throughout has been of enormous comfort,the IRO Review notes have helped keep the record straight and convey a balanced account of the situation.'

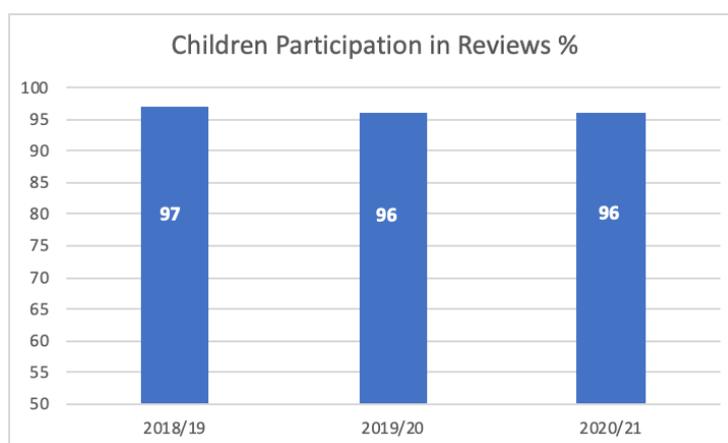
- 3.14 A child's initial review should be conducted within 20 working days of the child becoming looked after; and the second review should be conducted within three months of the initial review of the child's care plan. Subsequent reviews should be held not more than six months after this. A review should be held in a venue which is comfortable for the child or young person, usually where the child or young person is living. As stated, throughout the course of the pandemic, reviews have largely been held virtually, and monitoring remotely has proven challenging. However, IROs are now seeing children and young people where they live and are conducting reviews in line with Government regulation on Covid 19.
- 3.15 The timeliness of children's reviews is improving. The proportion of reviews held in timescale was 92% at the end of the year (2020/21). This is year on year improved performance (see Graph 4 and Table 6 below).



Graph 4
Source: SSDA903

Reviews for Children Looked After	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
No. of children looked after for 20+ working days at 31st March	437	441	441
(of the above) No. of children with reviews held in timescale	343	385	407
% of children with reviews held in timescale	78	87	92
Total no. of reviews held in the year for all children & young people	1267	1278	1264

Table 6
Source: SSSA903



Graph 5
Source: SSSA903

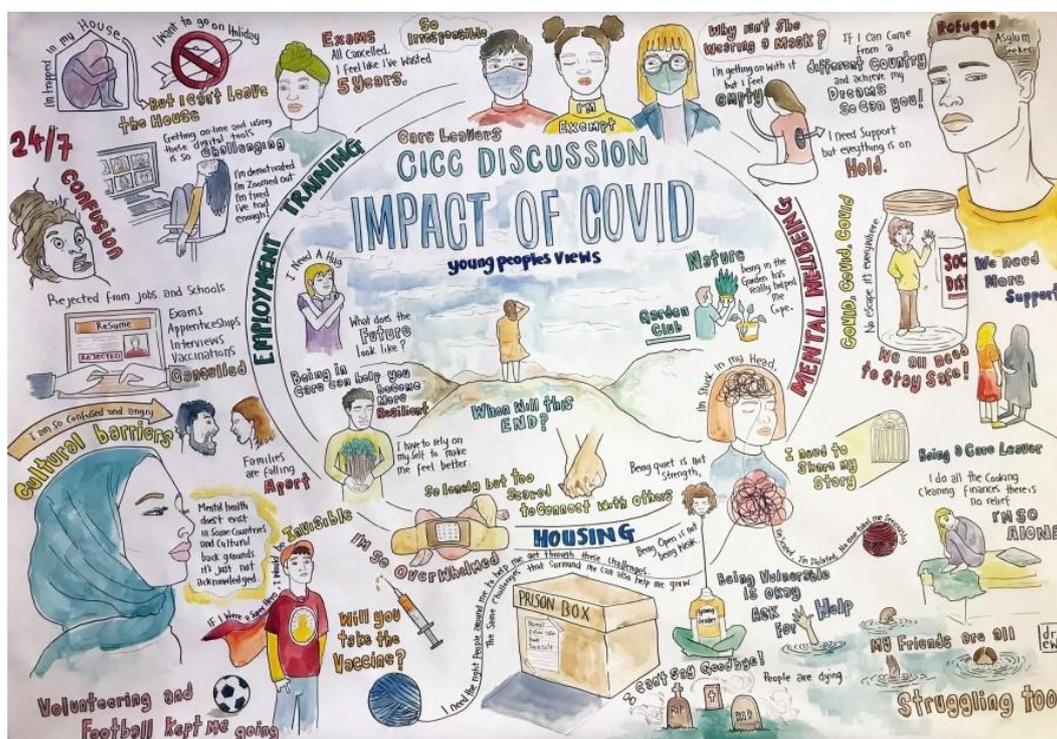
Children & Young People's Views

- 3.16 The above graph shows the proportion of children and young people looked after (at the end of year) aged 4 years and above who had participated in their review in some way. There is no published comparative information available for participation. Various methodology is used to encourage children's participation, notably if they do not wish to physically attend their review. Children and young people often meet with their named IRO face to face before their review to give their views. They can also use texting, emailing and online methods to share their views about where they live, their education, their social life and their health care.
- 3.17 Contact with birth families and carers remains a high priority for children and the frequency with which they can see their parents and or their siblings. Throughout the pandemic, this of course has been particularly difficult for those children who are not living with their birth family.

3.18 IROs will consult with children and young people before, during and after their reviews to hear their views, wishes and feelings and to monitor their needs whilst in care. The Service is moving from recording consultations on paper to an electronic format which will be overseen administratively by the Quality Assurance Service and with greater involvement from the Children's Rights Officer. How we gather and report upon what children and young people are saying about the services they receive and the quality of their care is an area for greater focus in 2021/22.

Senior Leader to an IRO

'I truly believe the need for all of our young people is a champion and I see you doing this for Southwark young people whom you have supported as IRO for the most consistent period. I wanted to say how much I value that and the difference it makes for our children. Thank you.'



Artist's illustration of a Pan London discussion during which Southwark's young people took part.

4. Children and Young People's Views

Bright Spots Survey

- 4.1 The Bright Spots Survey was conducted with children and young people in care from January to April 2020. Children and young people gave their views on a series of wellbeing indicators. The IRO Service, including the Children's Rights Officer, was very actively involved in planning and implementing this survey.
- 4.2 A substantial proportion of children who participated in the survey aged 11 to 18 years indicated that they did not speak regularly to the adults that they live with (40%). In response, the IRO Service has offered to hold focus groups with carers to understand what further help and support can be offered to ensure children and young people feel confident and able to talk regularly with the adults with whom they live about their wishes and feelings.
- 4.3 The vast majority of those who participated stated that they liked their living accommodation and their bedrooms (95%). As stated previously, a good number of children (1 in 5 surveyed) stated that they were unhappy with contact arrangements with their parents. The obvious restrictions in place during the pandemic has impacted children and young people's level of contact with birth families. To address this, IROs are placing greater focus on improving contact arrangements during reviews and ensuring appropriate referral to ReConnect.
- 4.4 Ninety one percent of children and young people participating in the survey felt that they had a good understanding of why they were in care, but a significant proportion of under 5s didn't have such an understanding. IROs are focusing on explaining to very young children as they enter care why these arrangements are in place for them. A stronger focus on life story work will support very young children in achieving an understanding.
- 4.5 Eleven percent of 11-18 year olds were identified as having low well-being. Most of were young people aged over 16. They also had in common:
- No adult in their life they could trust
 - Didn't like how they looked
 - Felt they were not given opportunities to be trusted
 - Didn't get to spend time outdoors
- 4.6 The above relates to the issue previously noted of improved use of SDQ information in care planning to assist with directing services to young people through the Clinical Care Service.
- 4.7 Support provided by the Children's Rights Officer has also highlighted that throughout the pandemic the mental health and the general wellbeing of young people remained a concern due to limited contact or poor relationships with family and friends and professionals.

Children's Rights Officer & Speaker Box

- 4.8 Speakerbox, our Children in Care Council is chaired by designated young people supported by the Children's Rights Officer (CRO). It continues to shape practice and influence decision making, and has developed effective conversations with the Corporate Parenting Committee. Workshop sessions with senior managers, focussing on specific topics, such as housing for young people leaving care, have been powerful and effective ways to communicate and to influence plans and services for young people. The Children's Rights Officer has noted that young people in care require access to support on a full time basis to allow them the opportunity to discuss their individual daily struggles and to 'off load'.
- 4.9 Speakerbox¹⁰ have been planning activities and events in 2020/21 to relieve some of these stresses experienced during lockdown for children in care and care leavers.
- 4.10 There is also the newly launched local offer for all children and young people with education needs and or disabilities inclusive of the offer from The Nest which provides free mental health and wellbeing support for young people aged 11 to 25 year olds.

Advocacy

- 4.11 IROs are proactive in making referrals and encourage children and young people to make referrals for an advocate if they feel they are not being heard or specific issues are not resolved in a timely or satisfactory way.
- 4.12 Southwark commissions Coram Voice to provide advocacy and Independent Visiting services to children and young. In respect of advocacy, in 2020/21, Coram Voice provided advocacy to 120 children and young people. This is down by 3 from the previous year.
- 4.13 Coram received 93 new referrals and completed 91 closures (ceasing advocacy). In addition, 6 children and young people were provided with advocacy funded by Coram Voice Outreach and Always Heard.
- 4.14 The advocacy service is designed to be as accessible as possible, via a freephone helpline, text and website, outreach, referrals from professionals and carers, and promoted with age specific and translated promotional materials. All Southwark young people have access to telephone interpretation where English is not their first language.¹¹
- 4.15 Whilst the number of children accessing advocacy increased slightly over the two years compared (2019/20 vs 2020/21), however, the total number of hours

¹⁰ SpeakerBox is a forum for Southwark children and young people in care and care leavers up to the age of 21(or 25 if they are in full time education).

¹¹ Coram Voice Annual Report into the provision of Advocacy Services to Southwark 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021

provided to children has dropped over the 2020/21 (total number of cases = 123 vs 131, total number of hours =1885.12 vs 1677.6).

- 4.16 A high proportion of children who have a disability accessed advocacy services in 2020/21. Fifty children or young people used the service throughout the period who identified as having a disability, which equates to 38.17% of the young people worked with.
- 4.17 Access to advocacy services seems not to be reflective of children and young people in care's ages or ethnicity (see profile of at Section 2). Advocacy is more likely to be accessed by those who are much older (16 to 21 years of age) and who are either of Asian or White ethnicity. It could be argued that it is always desirable that children and young people with a disability are over represented in this cohort, which they currently are.
- 4.18 The predominant issues raised via advocacy are shown below.

ISSUE	No.
Complaint	80
Support at meetings	72
Housing	45
Request to move placement	42
Finance, benefits and debt	40
Education, training and employment	34
Concerns about social worker or Personal Advisor	33
Request to move placement	24
Transition planning-disability	22
Request to stay in Placement	21

- 4.20 Children and young people were concerned about getting the right support at the right time with educational and housing needs, and about the level of finances received as well as support to manage these. IROs bring these issues raised via advocacy to bear during children's reviews and via monitoring and oversight of cases.
- 4.21 More active monitoring of the work done by Coram has recently taken place (July and August 2021), and the Service Manager for the IRO Service has established regular meetings with Coram and the wider Social Work Services (Care and 16+) to track children through the process to speedy resolution of issues where practicable.

5. Monitoring & Escalation

- 5.1 IROs have a statutory responsibility to raise concerns about the arrangements or services being provided for and to children, and ensure that Southwark Council addresses issues raised in a prompt manner to prevent delay in service provision or decision making affecting children's care.
- 5.2 It is usual that issues raised for children can be resolved at an early stage by talking to or meeting with the social worker or Team Manager directly. IROs seek to resolve issues informally.
- 5.3 IROs may not always pursue escalations assertively enough if they perceive that services are under pressure. However, IROs need to maintain their independence as befits their statutory function.
- 5.4 The IRO Service has mechanisms in place to scrutinise the practice of IROs and make sure that the focus remains entirely on the needs of the child. Managerial oversight of midway reviews and escalations are the checks and balances in place to monitor IROs' effectiveness in responding to concerns and achieving improved outcomes for children.
- 5.5 The table below (Table 7) shows escalations made to year end 2020/21 by type of issue raised by the IRO Service. As can be seen, the predominant issues centre on the quality of care planning and care plan delays. *Please note that numbers and percentages will not tally as IROs will select multiple choices from Mosaic when recording alerts and escalations.*

Issue raised	Issues number	%
Inadequate care plan	35	37%
Care plan delay	34	36%
CLA safeguarding	4	4%
CLA social work	10	11%
CLA placement	12	13%
Education	11	12%
Health	3	3%
18+ planning	4	4%
Follow-up actions	18	19%
Other	16	17%

Table 7
Source: Mosaic

- 5.6 From April 1st 2020 to March 31st 2021 IROs made 95 formal escalations about children to managers, covering 147 issues. Seven escalations (6%) were escalated to stage 2 to Head of Service to be resolved, and a further 3 were escalated to Stage 3 (Assistant Director). No issues were referred to CAFCASS.
- 5.7 Monitoring, alerts and escalation is an area which requires ongoing review to ensure the IRO Service is as effective as possible in the interests of children. Evidence of the IRO 'footprint' is becoming more evident, and this work will continue through 2021/22 to improve how well children's views, wants, needs and wishes are monitored and promoted.

6. Developmental Work for 2021/22

- 6.1 Work is ongoing continually to improve the effectiveness and quality of the work of IROs and the wider Service. A Service Plan was developed at the start of 2021/22 to guide this work with the following priorities:
- Improvements the timeliness of allocation of a named IRO to every children entering the care of Southwark Council
 - With the easing of Covid restrictions, more personal face to face time with children and young people where they live
 - Greater contact and collaboration with Speaker Box and proactively responding to children and young people about their wants and needs and how to promote young person centred reviews (young people chairing their own review, for example)
 - Continued improvement in making reviews child centred (writing directly to children following reviews about decisions made that affect them)
 - Collating and reporting on issues and themes arising from consultation with children and young people before and during their reviews and ensuring these are evident on children's case files
 - Responding to learning from audit and case review and reflecting this in service provision
 - Ensuring advocacy access is reflective of children and young people's profile
 - Improving monitoring and escalation processes in the interests of children and young people's care planning and evidencing the IRO's 'footprint'