



Annual Report Independent Reviewing Service 2022/23

London Borough of Southwark
Children and Families Services

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

Accountable Assistant Director: Tendai Murowe, Assistant Director of Quality Assurance and Practice Development, Children & Families, Children's and Adults' Services

Contents

Summary

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Profile of Southwark's Children and Young People**
- 3. Outcomes & Performance**
- 4. Children & Young People's Views**
- 5. Monitoring & Escalation**
- 6. Developmental Work for 2023/24**

Update on 2022/23 priorities;

- Working across all services, improvements to the timeliness of allocation of a named IRO to every child entering the care of Southwark Council – achieved and ongoing
- Increasing the timeliness of children’s looked after reviews – achieved and ongoing
- More face to face time between IROs and children and young people where they live and in the community – achieved and ongoing, IROs are seeing children and young people a minimum of twice a year in person
- Training provided to the social work teams by the Quality Assurance Unit and young people, to ensure Care Plans are co-produced with children and young people and written in the first person – achieved and ongoing
- Continued improvement in making reviews child centred (writing letters directly to children following reviews about decisions made that affect them) and increasing participation in reviews – achieved and ongoing, this is now embedded within the service
- 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 – ongoing piece of work required to be more creative with how we obtain and record feedback
- Training to be rolled out in 2022/23 for parent advocates who are supporting parents at Child Protection Conferences to extend this offer to parents attending LAC reviews to increase parental participation – achieved and ongoing
- Greater contact and collaboration with Speakerbox and proactively responding to children and young people about their wants and needs and how to promote meaningful young person centred reviews (young people chairing their own review, for example) – achieved and ongoing
- Speakerbox reaching a wider group of children and young people, particularly those with additional needs or a disability, living out of borough, in custodial settings and unaccompanied asylum seeking children – this work has started and is ongoing
- Responding to learning from audit and case review and reflecting this in service provision – achieved and ongoing
- Ensuring advocacy access is reflective of children and young people’s profile and ensuring themes are used to inform and improve service delivery – achieved and ongoing
- Improving monitoring and escalation processes in the interests of children and young people’s care planning and evidencing the IRO’s ‘footprint’ – ongoing piece of work

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 2022 and 31 March 2023. 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 2022/23, and also sets-out the priorities for 2023/24 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 \(Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010\)](#) and 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.
- 1.6 To achieve the above, the IRO Service is expected to:

⁴ [IRO Handbook, 2.10](#)

- 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** 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 within the wider service structure for Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement. 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, independent visitors and children and young people's participation (for those receiving children who are looked after by the local authority or are care leavers).
- 1.8 The Service benefits from close links to Permanency and Care Services (0-15) and 16 plus Service, Safeguarding and Family Support Service, the Virtual School and Head and other services within Quality Assurance and auditing services. There is also collaborative work with the Extra Familial Harm Service and with the QA Safeguarding Service (Child Protection Conferencing).
- 1.9 Administrative support is provided by a fulltime administrative 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 care plans and IRO decisions and recommendations and letter to the child/young person with children and parents.

- 1.10 The Southwark IRO Service has 7 permanent IRO posts and as of July 2023 consists of 6 permanent full time and 2 permanent part time IROs. Over the past 12 months the Service has made use of one agency worker and sessional staff whilst we have been recruiting to permanent roles as well as additional capacity via the AidHour Service whenever there is a need to ensure capacity to function within statutory regulation. For example, when there is an increase in numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children requiring a service from the local authority.
- 1.11 The IRO Service has been largely stable over the past 12 months to April 2023, although there has been some sickness within the team and one experienced IRO left the service to take up another role in Southwark. The Service Manager has been focusing on recruitment of permanent IROs to ensure stability and long term relationships with children and young people. In the past 12 months 2 permanent part time IROs and 3 permanent full time IROs have been recruited. 2 of these IROs were already working in Southwark in other roles and 2 had previously worked for Southwark in other roles. As of the 10th July 2023 we are fully staffed with a permanent team.
- 1.12 Approximately 74% of children receiving care services were allocated to the permanent IROs and approximately 26% were allocated to those who are sessional IROs. Now the service have recruited more permanent IROs most young people have now transferred from sessional IROs to the permanently recruited IROs. A small percentage of young people remain with sessional IROs due to sickness absence in the team.
- 1.13 IROs who are male, and of Black or Black British ethnicity continue to be unrepresented in the profile of our IRO service, 3 of the 8 permanent IROs are of Black/Black British ethnicity and the only male IRO in the team has recently moved to another position in Southwark. IROs ensure they consider and promote the specific cultural and identity needs of children and young people through the review of their care plans.
- 1.14 Discussions have been held with the Assistant Director of Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement and the Principal Social Worker to consider creating an internal training pathway for social workers or social work managers who aspire to become an IRO. We want to be in a position where we can 'grow our own' and inspire and upskill current members of staff to step up into IRO positions.
- 1.15 All IROs have at least five years post-qualifying experience as a social worker and are registered with Social Work England. The majority of IROs have previously held managerial roles in other services and all have had experience within safeguarding services and/or services for 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. This is particularly important when there are changes in the network around the child or young person.

- 1.17 IROs now have access to the clinical service. A Clinical Practitioner co-chairs a bi monthly team meeting with the Quality Assurance Service Manager which focusses on reflective discussions regarding research, practice and dilemmas.

Email to IRO from a Foster Carer

Just wanted to say how lovely yesterday's reviews went. I can honestly say after over 20 years of fostering this was by far the most relaxed and child centered review. It is such a pleasure and positive experience for the children to have such a great team supporting them

Caseloads

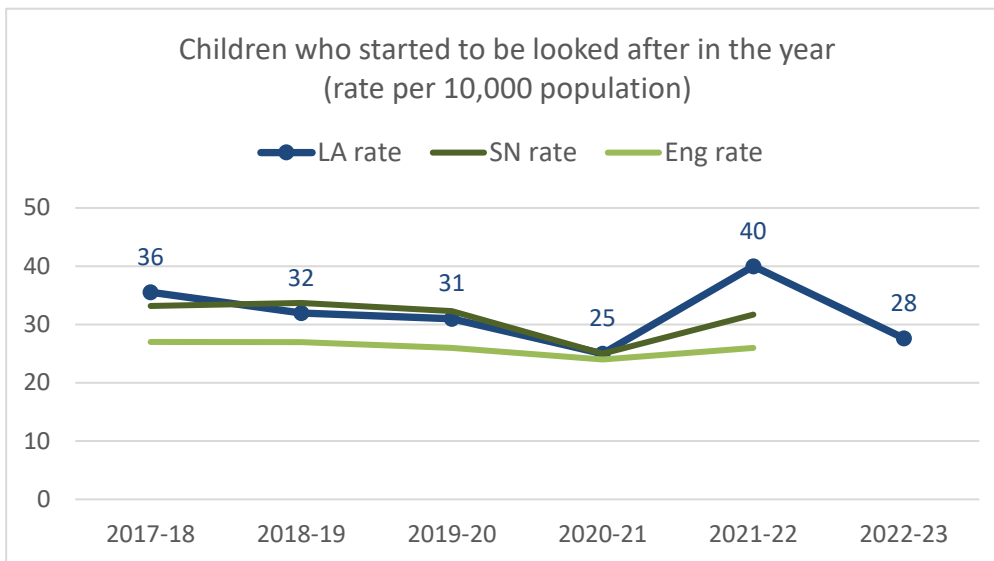
- 1.18 IRO caseloads in Southwark are within those limits recommended in guidance (see 7.13 to 7.15 of the IRO Handbook). The recommended average caseload is between 50 and 70 looked after children. The average caseload an IRO holds in Southwark is approximately 55 to 60 children. The highest currently is 66 which is due to pressures around covering sickness absence and some large sibling groups who have recently become looked after. The workload for an IRO may also be considered in relation to time 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.
- 1.19 Most reviews take place in person however, some children and young people prefer virtual methods of interaction. If a review takes place virtually there is an expectation that the IRO will visit the child or young person where they live either before or after the review. All children and young people should be visited in person by their IRO a minimum of twice per year.

Multi-agency Liaison & Quality Assurance

- 1.20 A permanent Assistant Director for Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement commenced their role in July 2022. They directly line manage the Service Manager for the IRO Service.
- 1.21 The Service Manager attends a weekly multi-agency meeting which focusses on the timeliness of PEPs, Initial Health Assessments and Review Health Assessments.
- 1.22 CAF/CASS liaison takes place regularly with quarterly meetings between the Quality Assurance Service Manager, Head of Service for Safeguarding and Family support, Care Proceedings Case Manager and CAF/CASS. IROs remain in close contact with Guardians and have electronic access to legal bundles to ensure oversight of children's cases where these are in proceedings.
- 1.23 The IRO Service Manager attends the bi weekly Complex Needs Panel and monthly Permanence Taskforce as well as other strategic meetings.
- 1.24 Southwark hold a quarterly 'Learning Fest'. This is a 1-2 week period which focusses on a practice theme and involves auditing, closing the loop on learning from audit activity and training events which also include young people or adults with lived experience of children's services leading sessions. IROs participate

in these quarterly thematic case audits and the Service Manager is involved in the moderation of audits. The Service Manager attends bi monthly performance meetings for the All Age Disability, Care and Permanency, Safeguarding and Family Support and 16+ Services.

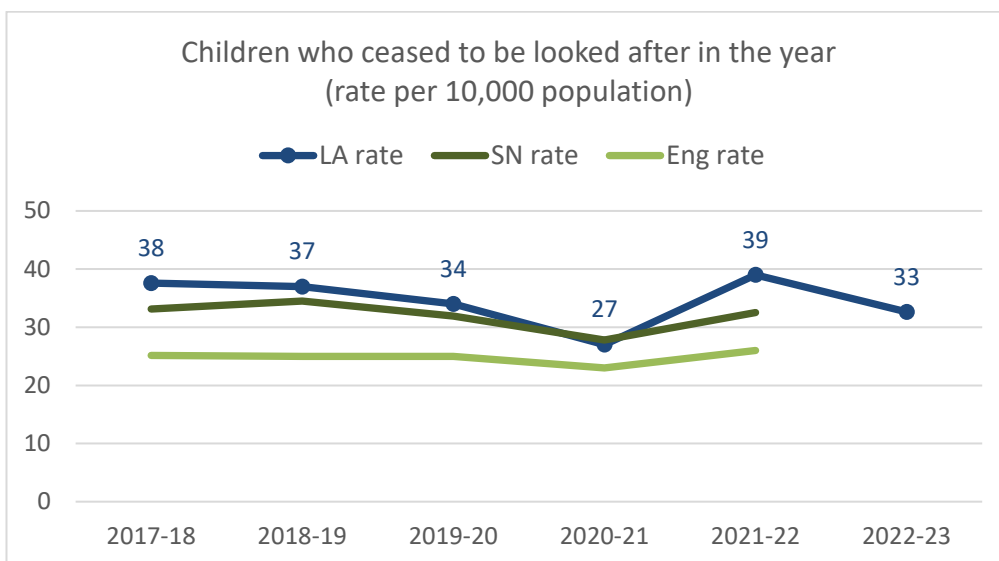
2. Profile of Southwark’s Children & Young People



Graph1
Source: SSDA903

2.1 The graph above relates to the rates of children starting to be looked after and compares Southwark’s rate of children entering care with our statistical neighbours and the national rate. Southwark’s rate has decreased over 2022/23 and is now more in line with our statistical neighbours and the national average.

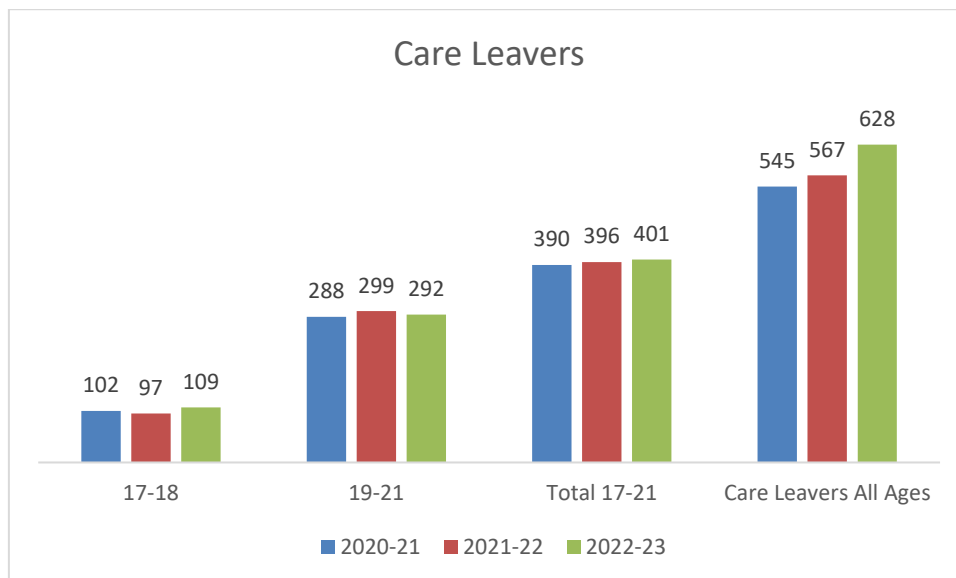
2.2 For IROs, manageable caseloads (as previously evidenced at 1.17) enable improved oversight, allowing time for midway reviews and attendance at other key meetings for children (such as Permanency Planning Meetings, Stability Meetings and Professionals Meetings). This then means a greater focus on 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

(2017/18 to year end 2022/23). Last year saw a dip in the number of children leaving care (N=215), bringing our rate more in line with that of our statistical neighbours.



Graph 3
Source: SSDA903 and Internal Performance Data

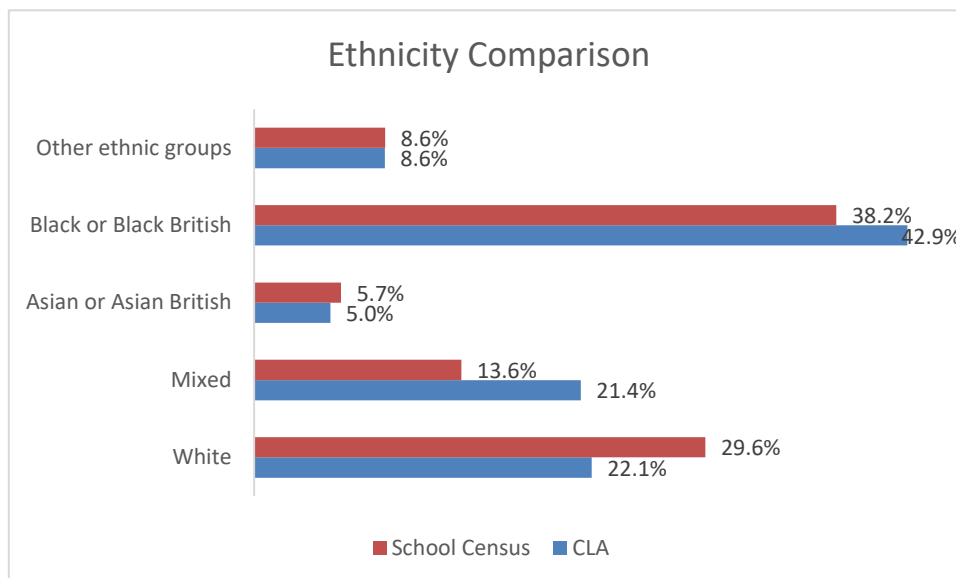
2.4 Care leaver numbers have increased, with a 15% increase across the three years shown above (n= 83). IROs have oversight of pathway planning for young people as they approach leaving care age and liaise closely with the 16+ Services. The 16+ Service is in touch with approximately 99% of care leavers aged between 19 and 21 years. Audit work has demonstrated that staying in touch and forming trusted relationships for Care Leavers is a particular strength.

| No. & Rate of Children Looked After (CLA) | SNs 2021/22 | Southwark 2020/21 | Southwark 2021/22 | Southwark 2022/23 |
|---|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| CLA as at 31 st March (n) | N/A | 449 | 457 | 420 |
| CLA as at 31 st March per 10,000 | 69 | 69 | 69 | 63.7 |
| CLA starting to 31 st March (n) | N/A | 166 | 228 | 182 |
| CLA starting to 31 st March per 10,000 | 32 | 25 | 40 | 27.6 |
| CLA ceasing to 31 st March (n) | N/A | 178 | 223 | 215 |
| CLA ceasing to 31 st March per 10,000 | 26 | 27 | 39 | 32.6 |

Table 1
Source: SSDA903

2.5 The table above (Table 1) shows children in care as at the 31st of March 2023 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.

- 2.6 As noted in the summary, children who are of Black or Black British ethnicity are over represented amongst our children in care (42.9% for 2022/23). School census ethnicity information is used as proxy to show under or over represented ethnic groups. Within the school census Black or Black British as an ethnicity account for 38.2%



Graph 4
Source: SSSA903 and School Census

- 2.7 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.
- 2.8 The proportion of children who are of White or Asian ethnicity who are looked after by Southwark is lower than our statistical neighbours.

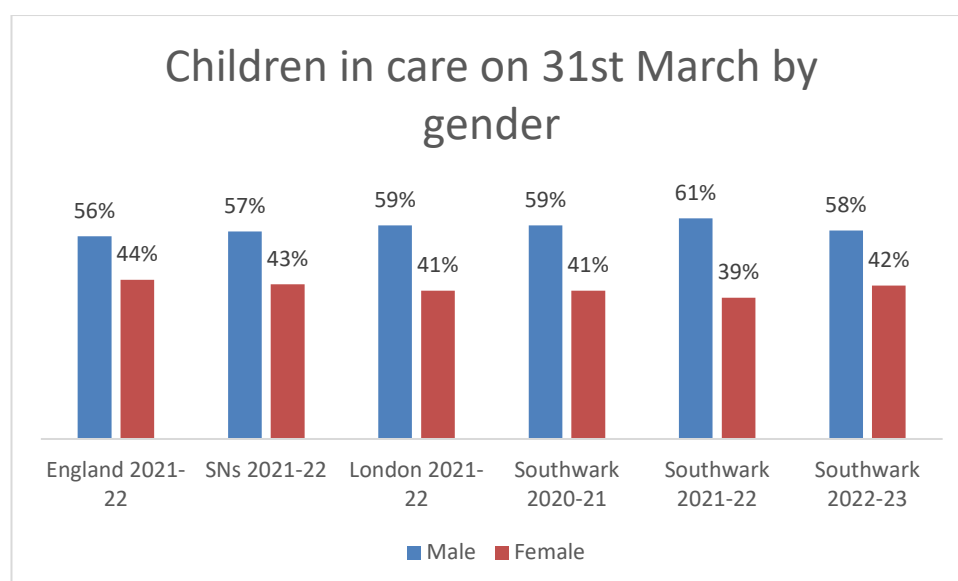
| Children by Ethnicity % | SNs 2021/22 | Southwark 2020/21 | Southwark 2021/22 | Southwark 2022/23 |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| White | 31 | 26 | 23 | 22 |
| Mixed | 20 | 20 | 19 | 21 |
| Asian or Asian British | 8 | 5 | 7 | 5 |
| Black or Black British | 35 | 45 | 41 | 43 |
| Other ethnic groups | 8 | 4 | 10 | 9 |

Table 2
Source: SSSA903

- 2.9 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, cultural and identity needs.
- 2.10 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.

- 2.11 Strategic work is being undertaken to better understand the reasons behind the disproportionality and address the causes.
- 2.12 A bespoke and mandatory training programme has been developed and commenced in September 2022 for all social work staff, inclusive of IROs which covers racism, anti-discriminatory practice, black history and reducing inequalities. This programme is currently being reviewed and evaluated and children in care and careleavers have been consulted about the content and suggested changes. There are plans for children in care and careleavers to co-facilitate the training programme in the future. Southwark also run a mandatory inverse mentoring scheme where white senior managers are matched with a black, Asian or ethnic minority member of staff as their mentor.
- 2.13 Southwark have provided funding for 6 careleavers to undertake a mentoring programme. These sessions have started and been positively received, once qualified they will be matched with a senior member of staff to mentor them. It is hoped that this will lead to young people’s views being increasingly embedded in strategic decision making about how Southwark works with and supports children in care and careleavers.
- 2.14 There is continued developmental work on the ReConnect programme 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
- 2.15 The graph below (Graph 5) 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 5
Source: SSSA903

- 2.16 Southwark’s looked after children are proportionately older than our statistical
- IRO Annual Report 2022/23 v.1

neighbours and the inner London averages. The highest proportion are aged between 10 to 15 years (43.8% at end of 2022/23, compared to 36% for our statistical neighbours).

- 2.17 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.
- 2.18 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 2021/22 | SNs 2021/22 | London 2021/22 | Southwark 2020/21 | Southwark 2021/22 | Southwark 2022/23 |
|--------------------|-----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Under 1 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| 1 to 4 | 14 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 6 | 5 |
| 5 to 9 | 18 | 13 | 12 | 11 | 10 | 9 |
| 10 to 15 | 39 | 36 | 36 | 44 | 43 | 44 |
| 16 and over | 24 | 35 | 38 | 32 | 39 | 40 |

Table 3
Source: SSDA903

3. Outcomes & Performance

Stability of Care

- 3.1 IROs have a significant role in supporting children to remain living in a stable home and in ensuring that they have the right support to meet their needs (stability of care). Stability of children remaining where they are living has declined over the last year with two more children experiencing three or more moves (an increase of 0.8 percentage points) compared with the previous year, but remains comparable with other boroughs.
- 3.2 Southwark have recently employed a Permanence Lead who is focusing on looking at how Southwark can increase stability and permanence for children and young people. There is a focus on ensuring that regular permanence planning meetings are taking place, robust and regularly reviewed support plans are in place and children are being matched with foster carers at fostering panel or via the Looked After Review process, if over 14. Stability meetings need to be happening to support children and young people’s carers not just when things are challenging but as a pre-emptive and supportive measure.
- 3.3 Where children were living (by placement type) as at the end of year 2023 is shown in the table below (Table 4). Some comparative information on placement type is unavailable, for example, permanent foster placement information. Southwark’s proportion of children in foster care is in line with London at 69%, and a good proportion of placements for children are with permanent foster carers. 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.

- 3.4 Audit work completed with the Care and Permanency Service has shown that IRO Annual Report 2022/23 v.1

children in long term stable placements with committed carers do very well at school and socially.

- 3.5 Southwark has joined the [Commissioning Alliance](#) to support work on sufficiency of placements and developing capacity within and in the proximity of the Borough is a high priority. Southwark are planning to open their own residential provision in 2024 and are also considering opening a semi independent provision also in Southwark. Placement sufficiency remains a national issue.

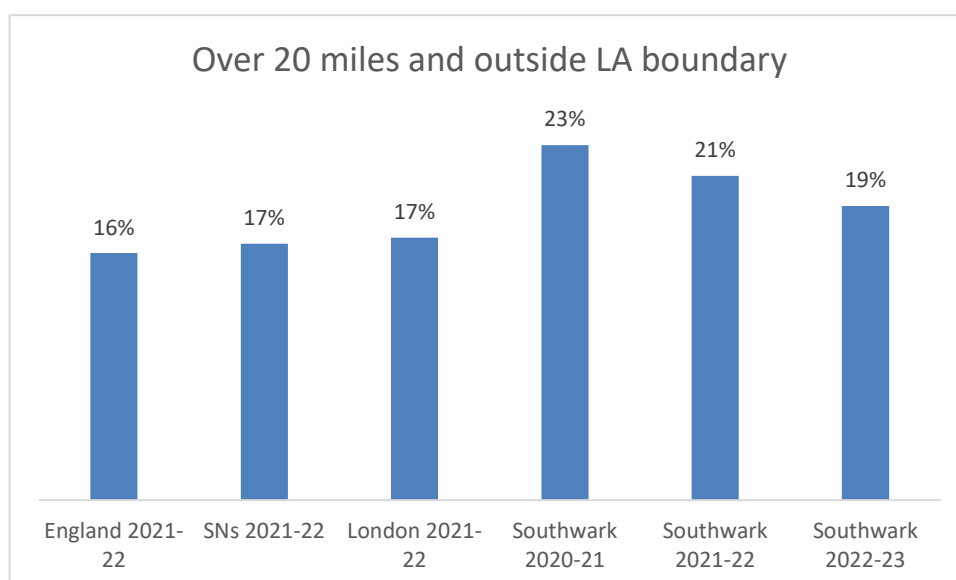
| Children by Placement Type | England | SNs | London | Southwark | Southwark |
|--|---------|---------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| | 2021-22 | 2021-22 | 2021-22 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 |
| Foster placements | 70% | 75% | 69% | 72% | 76% |
| Concurrent planning foster placements | - | - | - | 1% | 1% |
| Foster placements with relative(s) or friends(s) | - | - | - | 20% | 20% |
| Foster placements confirmed as permanent (long term) | - | - | - | 42% | 42% |
| Placed for adoption | 3% | 2% | 2% | 1% | 1% |
| Placement with parents | 7% | 4% | 3% | 1% | 1% |
| Other placement in the community | 2% | 2% | 2% | - | 0% |
| Children's homes, secure units and hostels | 16% | 16% | 22% | 26% | 18% |
| Other residential settings | 1% | 3% | 2% | 2% | 2% |
| Residential schools | - | 0% | - | - | 0% |
| Other placements | 1% | 0% | - | 0% | 0% |

Table 4 Source: SSDA903

| Stability of Care | SNs 2021/22 | London 2021/22 | Southwark 2021/22 | Southwark 2022/23 |
|--|-------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| % of children with 3+ placements | 10% | 10% | 9% | 9.8% |
| % of children in care for 2.5 years in placement for 2 years + | 74% | 70% | 76% | 64.7% |

Table 5 Source: SSDA903

- 3.6 Wherever possible, children and young people should be placed to live close to their families. The graph below (Graph 6) 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, although it has reduced by 2 percentage points in 2022/23.
- 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. Discussions are taking place about IROs chairing disruption meetings if a long term living arrangement breaks down to ensure that there is an understanding about precipitating events and learning from these.

Graph 6
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 (97.7% as at the end of year 2023), the timeliness of initial health assessments requires improvement. There is a weekly meeting to address this which is chaired by the Assistant Director and the timeliness of initial health assessments is increasing.
- 3.10 Children's access to timely dental checks has been and remains an area significantly impacted by the pandemic, however performance has increased during the year to 76.4%. The vast majority of children in care have a contemporary SDQ score (84.8%), 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. Southwark are launching the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Assessment (CANS). This will sit alongside the SDQ and it is hoped will be a clearer picture of the mental health support and treatment needs of children in care.

| Outcomes for Children Looked After | England 2021-22 | SNs 2021-22 | London 2021-22 | Southwark 2021-22 | Southwark 2022-23 |
|---|-----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Number of children whose immunisations were up to date | 85% | 72% | 76% | 82% | 65% |
| Number of children who had their teeth checked by a dentist | 70% | 65% | 69% | 57% | 76% |
| Number of children who had their annual health assessment | 89% | 90% | 92% | 95% | 98% |
| Children looked after for at least 12 months aged 4 to 16 with an SDQ score | 77% | 84% | 85% | 82% | 85% |
| Average score per child | 14 | 13 | 13 | 14 | 13 |

Table 6
Source: SSDA903

Educational Achievement & Attainment

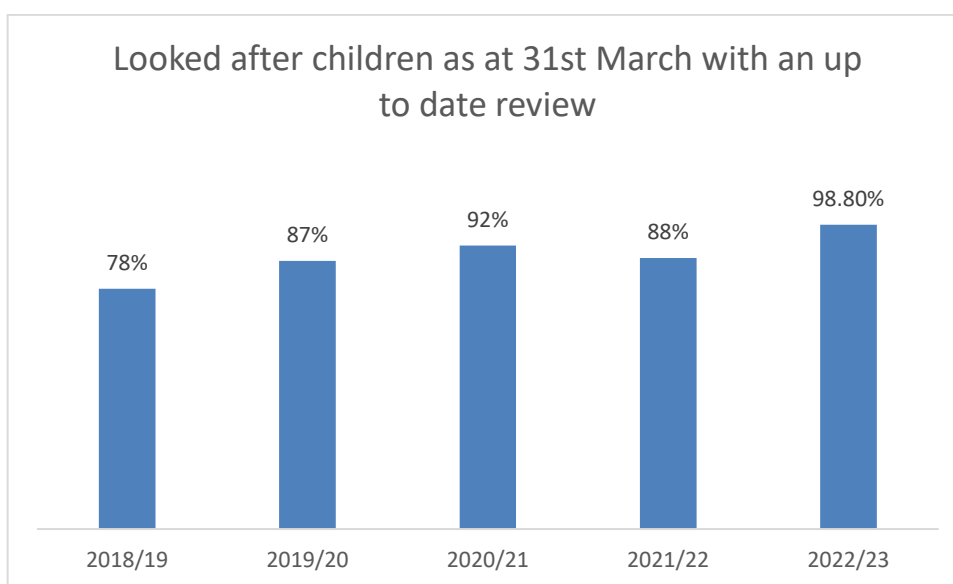
3.12 The IRO Service has oversight of Personal Education Plan (PEP) completion and quality as well as children and young people missing education and what is being done to support the young person to remain in education. A PEP should be started within 10 days of a child becoming looked after and their plan must be in place by their first review. In 2022/23 the Virtual School Head Teacher launched the E-PEP which is an electronic document that can be completed online by schools and social workers. This has led to PEPs being undertaken more consistently and written up in a timely manner. 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 51% of Southwark's 2022 GCSE cohort achieved a Grade 1-9 in English and Maths. 19% of our looked after children achieved a 9-4 pass in English and Maths in 2022.

Children & Young People’s Reviews

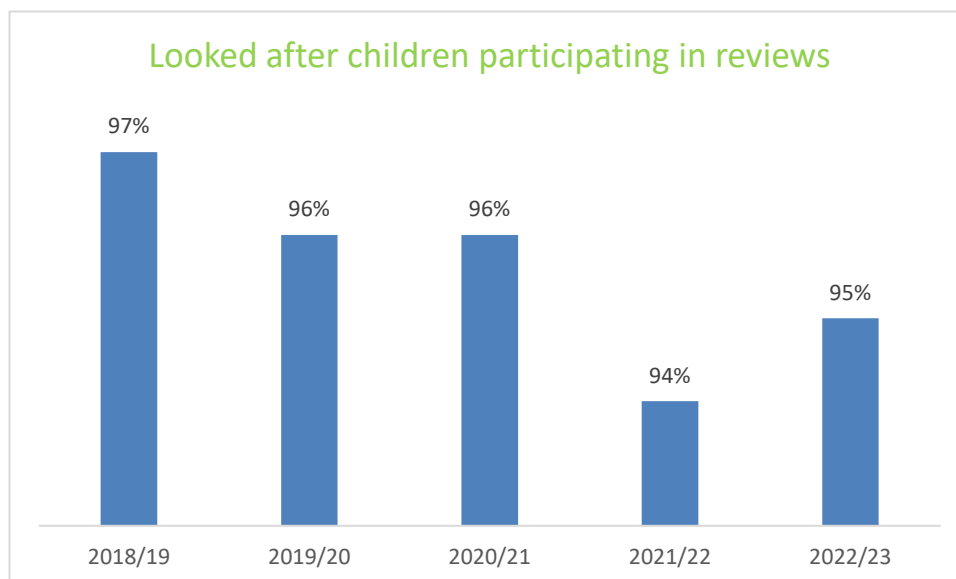
- 3.14 A child’s initial review should be conducted within 20 working days of the child becoming looked after; and the second review should be conducted within three months of the initial review of the child’s care plan. Subsequent reviews should be held not more than six months after this. A review should be held in a venue which is comfortable for the child or young person, usually where the child or young person is living. IROs see children and young people where they live either before the review, as part of the review, or afterwards, depending on the wishes of the child or young person.
- 3.15 The Care Plan and IRO minutes were reviewed in 2022 and all care and pathway plans are being written in the first person and co-produced with children and young people. The Service Manager along with the Principal Social worker, Children’s Rights Officer and a Southwark Care Leaver have been running regular training for social workers to embed this practice. Hearing from someone with lived experience of care planning has been positively received by social workers and is having a significant impact on changing practice to be more child friendly. The IROs are writing their minutes as a letter to the child or young person and this is also now embedded as best practice. Feedback from young people has been positive.
- 3.16 Of the looked after children as at 31st March 2023, 98.8% had an up to date review. This is thought to be as a result of stability within the IRO service and timely notifications when children and young people become looked after. (see Graph 7 and Table 7 below).



Graph 7
Source: SSDA903

| Reviews for Children Looked After | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| No. of children looked after for 20+ working days at 31st March | 441 | 444 | 439 | 408 |
| (of the above) No. of children with reviews held in timescale | 385 | 407 | 394 | 403 |
| % of children with reviews held in timescale | 87 | 92 | 88 | 98.8 |
| Total no. of reviews held in the year for all children & young people | 1278 | 1264 | 1222 | 1158 |

Table 7
Source: SSDA903



Graph 8
Source: SSDA903

Children & Young People's Views

- 3.17 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. There are plans to develop an 'App' and website for children and young people and this will be an additional medium where they can share their views.
- 3.18 Family time 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. IROs are ensuring that family time plans are being regularly reviewed in terms of the venue and levels of supervision.

- 3.19 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 records consultations via an electronic format which is overseen administratively by the Quality Assurance Service.
- 3.20 Regular consultations take place with Speakerbox to involve children and young people in evaluating practice.

4. Children and Young People's Views

Bright Spots Survey

- 4.1 The Bright Spots Survey was last 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 the planning and implementation of the 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%).
- 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 family time arrangements with their parents. The obvious restrictions in place during the pandemic impacted on children and young people spending time with birth families. To address this, IROs are placing greater focus on reviewing family time arrangements during reviews and ensuring appropriate referrals to ReConnect. The social work teams, in consultation with IROs are also reviewing the supervision of family time and venues where young people see their families to ensure there are no unnecessary restrictions in place simply because they haven't been regularly reviewed.
- 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 and the Care Plans and IRO review minutes now have a child friendly explanation of the journey into and through care. The Caringlife App has been launched and is now being used across all social work teams. It provides a secure space for photographs and previous memories to be uploaded by carers, young people, families and professionals to ensure children and young people have important memories securely stored.
- 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 is likely to be influenced by Covid restrictions that were in place at the time of the surveys and the impact of the pandemic. The implementation of CANS in the near future will assist with planning support services to improve young people's mental well-being.
- 4.7 A further Brightspots survey will be commissioned to take place in 2024.

Children's Rights Officer & Speakerbox

- 4.8 Speakerbox⁷, our Children in Care Council is chaired by designated young people supported by the Children's Rights and Participation Officers (CRO) and is divided into Speakerbox Junior and Speakerbox Senior. The Speakerbox mission and purpose is: *empowering, upskilling and equipping our children and young people with the tools to self-advocate whilst amplifying the voices of all our care experienced children and young people.*
- 4.9 As of 25th April 2023 there are now two CROs with one post being 50% funded by the Virtual School alongside educational activities for care experienced children and young people.
- 4.10 Throughout 2022/23 Speakerbox have continued to shape practice and influence decision making through various means such as developing and delivering training, recruitment of staff, consultations, attending training workshops, attending events/programmes and campaigning. Over the course of the year there were 1005 episodes where young people participated via Speakerbox.
- 4.11 Children, young people and parents are actively involved in the recruitment of social workers and managers of all levels, there is an expectation that all recruitment will include a panel of young people and parents. Panel chairs and members frequently feedback how much children and young people bring to the process and how insightful they are.
- 4.12 Over the past year children and young people have delivered mental health training to newly qualified social workers, developed 'total respect' training, trained care experienced young people from the London Boroughs of Southwark, Greenwich and Lewisham to interview Step up to Social Work students, and supported the Skills to Foster training. They were involved in many consultations some of which included the re-commissioning of the advocacy and independent visitor service, input into developing the neglect strategy, commissioning mediation services and been part of a group reviewing the National Care Standards with the DfE. Young people also voiced the animations for the foster carer recruitment campaign.
- 4.13 Speakerbox run a fortnightly session called Creative Collective which is an opportunity for care experienced young people to come together to sing and engage in creative activities, facilitated by a singer songwriter and one of extremely talented careleavers.
- 4.14 Young people have grown in confidence and are active participants at every Corporate Parenting Committee. They have raised topics which are important to them such as housing for young people leaving care, finances, opportunities for paid employment and training, mental health support and as a result have influenced plans and services for young people.

- 4.15 Speakerbox over the past 12 months have focused on an identity campaign, children and young people had sessions with a photographer and film maker and also created a drama performance. Over 60 people attended the launch event at the South London Gallery where their photography was displayed, there was a drama performance, spoken word and their film outlining why identity was so important for care experienced children and young people was premiered. This will be used in training for social workers. Children and young people also nominated social workers, IROs and foster carers who had helped to 'bridge the gap'.
- 4.16 Speakerbox have been planning activities and events throughout 2022/23 to take place each holiday period to provide new opportunities and experiences for children in care and care leavers. These activities have included a project on identity for different age groups, a film making project, photography project, a sports mentoring programme, and trips to escape rooms, bowling, Thorpe Park and Legoland.
- 4.17 With 2 CROs the next 12 months will focus on Speakerbox continuing to have more strategic influence with the senior leadership team as well as engaging more under 12s, young people with additional needs, young people in custodial and residential settings and young people living out of borough. There are plans in place to develop a Speakerbox website for children and young people so that they are aware of their rights and entitlements and what their journey into and through care might look like.

⁷ SpeakerBox is a forum for Southwark children and young people in care and care leavers up to the age of 25.

Advocacy and Independent Visitors

- 4.18 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. Social workers and Personal Advisors are also proactive with making referrals or promoting advocacy for children and young people.
- 4.19 Southwark commissions Coram Voice to provide advocacy and Independent Visiting services to children and young. In respect of advocacy, in 2022/23, Coram Voice provided advocacy to 144 children and young people. This is a reduction by 6 from the previous year.
- 4.20 Coram received 93 new referrals and completed 90 closures (ceasing advocacy). In addition, 8 children and young people were provided with advocacy funded by Coram Voice Outreach and Always Heard.
- 4.21 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.⁸
- 4.22 The total number of cases has decreased slightly but the hours provided to children have increased over the 2022/23 period (total number of cases = 144 vs 150, total number of hours =1956.99 vs 1647.91).
- 4.23 A high proportion of children who have a disability accessed advocacy services in 2022/23. 46 children or young people (29%) used the service throughout the period who identified as having a disability. Coram have specialist advocates who are able to provide non instructed advocacy when needed.
- 4.24 Almost half of young people who used advocacy were aged between 12 and 17 years of age, a slightly higher percentage were aged between 18 and 25. Young people living out of borough and males were more likely to access advocacy. White British young people were the highest users of advocacy followed closely by Black or Black British African young people.

⁸ Coram Voice Annual Report into the provision of Advocacy Services to Southwark 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023

4.25 The predominant issues raised via advocacy are shown below.

| ISSUE | No. |
|---|------------|
| Housing | 45 |
| Concerns about social worker/Personal Advisor | 42 |
| Complaint | 33 |
| Support at meetings | 20 |
| Education, training and employment | 20 |
| Finance, Benefits and Debt | 17 |
| Pathway Planning | 34 |
| Request to move | 17 |
| Homelessness | 33 |

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.

4.21 More active monitoring of the work done by Coram is taking place, and the Service Manager for the IRO Service and Children's Rights Officer has met regularly with Coram and the wider Social Work Services (All Age Disability, Care and 16+) to track children through the process to speedy resolution of issues where practicable.

4.22 In respect of Independent Visitors, Coram Voice provided 30 children and young people with an independent visiting service with 513.5 recorded face to face visits between young people and their independent visitors across the year. There were a broad range of different age groups accessing the independent visiting service with 13 children aged under 13 years and 17 children aged 14-19 years. 43% of the young people matched a reported to have a disability, have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) or have mental health needs.

Feedback from young people about Independent Visitors

'My IV helped a lot with being able to talk to people because before I was quite shy. She helped me with socialising and we have a lot of fun together.'

'This is the perfect service for anyone looking for a new friend.'

5. Monitoring & Escalation

- 5.1 As stated, IROs have a statutory responsibility to raise concerns about the arrangements or services being provided for and to children and young people, 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 will seek to resolve issues informally, and this is evidenced by data which shows that from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023 there were 345 case alerts (on Mosaic) by IROs resulting in resolution at an earlier stage necessitating far fewer higher level escalations. The main focus is improving services for children and pursuing any alerts through to resolution.
- 5.3 IROs may not always pursue escalations assertively enough if they perceive that services are under pressure. This has been particularly evident when there have been changes in social workers which have impacted on recommendations from reviews not being carried out. IROs need to keep their focus on the impact on the child and maintain their independence.
- 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 8) shows escalations made to year end 2022/23 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 as well as health and education. **Please note that numbers will not tally as IROs will select multiple choices from Mosaic when recording alerts and escalations.**

| Issue raised | Issues number |
|------------------------------------|---------------|
| LAC Drift in implementing plan | 13 |
| LAC Inadequate care plan | 8 |
| LAC Social work provision concerns | 5 |
| LAC Placement concerns | 5 |
| LAC Education concerns | 5 |
| LAC Other | 4 |
| LAC 18+ planning concerns | 3 |
| LAC Incomplete review decisions | 3 |
| LAC Safeguarding concerns | 1 |
| LAC Health concerns | 1 |

Table 8
Source: Mosaic

- 5.6 From April 1st 2022 to March 31st 2023 IROs have made 22 formal escalations to managers. One escalation (4.5%) was escalated to stage 2 to Head of Service to be resolved, with the same one being escalated to Stage 3 (Assistant Director). No issues were referred to CAF/CASS, although as stated, IROs work in close liaison with Guardians for independent oversight of care planning.
- 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. Lunchtime learning sessions from September 2023 will focus on specific areas, with escalations being one of them.

6. Ofsted 2022

- 6.1 Southwark Children's Services were inspected by Ofsted between 26 and 30 September 2022. The inspection found that children who need help, protection and care continue to receive good services. Frontline staff, leaders and managers work effectively to safeguard and support children and to improve services provided to them. As a result, children's lives are improved.
- 6.2 The care planning and review process was seen as a strength by Ofsted. They commented on child friendly practices such as writing letters to children and noted that children's care plans are strong, reflecting their needs accurately. Their reviews are timely and focus effectively on risk and need. Plans are updated to reflect new and emerging information.
- 6.3 Ofsted found children in care have a strong voice and influence within the local authority. Children told inspectors how important this is for them. They spoke passionately about the importance of being part of 'Speaker Box', the council's Children in Care Council. They treasure the friendships they have made and the opportunity it gives them to be a collective voice in service development. They feel valued and listened to.

7. Developmental Work for 2023/24

7.1 Work is ongoing continually to improve the effectiveness and quality of the work done by IROs and the wider Service. The following priorities have been identified for 2023/24;

- Fortnightly focus on practice sessions between September and December 2023 will focus on all aspects of the IRO role and how the service can continue to be more effective and child centred. Comprehensive practice guidance will be produced at the end of the sessions to ensure consistency in practice amongst IROs. This will also be helpful for the social work teams so they better understand the role and responsibilities of the IRO
- Closer working relationships with the social work teams are required in order to ensure there is a culture where Care and Pathway Plans are completed in good time, social workers prioritise attendance at reviews and ensure they complete the actions between reviews which are recorded in care and pathway plans and the IRO recommendations. Regular coffee mornings will take place in the social work offices as well as attendance by the Service Manager at the social work service meetings to boost visibility of IROs and understanding of the role.
- The Service Manager will continue to work with the performance team to expand the Powerbi monitoring dashboard so we can have a wider picture (in real time) of areas of strength and development for the IRO service. Additions will include reporting on children's participation codes, reporting on parental participation, which we do not currently measure, reporting on the themes from escalations, reporting on children being seen in person as part of their review and finally reporting on midway reviews. This will enable us to ensure we are monitoring these areas and able to understand and respond to the holistic performance of the service in real time, rather than when the end of year statistics are collated
- The service will continue to focus on maintaining the timeliness of children's looked after reviews
- There will be closer oversight and monitoring of stability and permanence for children and young people
- Escalation processes will be improved. The escalation form and process is changing and will be relaunched by the end of 2023. IROs and all social work teams have been consulted about the changes and a new form has been drafted. Clear guidance about the changes and process will be provided for IROs and social work teams
- The Quality Assurance Unit, alongside young people and care leavers will continue to provide training to the social work teams to ensure Care Plans are co-produced with children and young people and written in the first person
- Speakerbox now has two Children's Rights and Participation Officers. With this increased capacity they have started to expand their reach. Their focus is on engaging a wider group of children and young people, particularly under 13s and those with additional needs or a disability, living out of borough, in custodial settings and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.