

Annual Report

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service 2023/24

London Borough of Southwark Children and
Families Services

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Introduction

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 2023 and 31 March 2024. 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.

This annual report provides qualitative and quantitative information about the service provided in 2023/24, and also sets-out the priorities for 2024/25 to further improve the effectiveness of the service.

Legal Context and Purpose of Service

The Independent Reviewing 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.

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 and where they are living. 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

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. 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.

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** 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

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 children who are looked after by the local authority or are care leavers).

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 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).

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 plans and IRO reports with children and parents.

The Soutwark IRO Service now has 7 permanent IRO posts and consists of 6 permanent full time and 2 permanent part time IROs. Over the past 12 months the Service has made use sessional staff whilst we have been recruiting to permanent roles and covering long term sickness absence. The use of sessional IROs ceased in August 2024.

IROs who are male, continue to be unrepresented in the profile of our IRO service, and those of Black or Black British ethnicity are underrepresented, with 3 of the 8 permanent IROs being of Black/Black British ethnicity. IROs consider and promote the specific cultural and identity needs of children and young people through the review of their care plans.

There is a leadership and management offer to all staff in Children's Services with courses for aspiring and existing managers provided as well as a 1:1 coaching offer. We are hoping this will lead to Southwark being in a position where we can 'grow our own' and inspire and upskill current members of staff to step up into IRO positions when they become available.

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.

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.

IROs have access to the clinical service and 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

I want to express my sincere gratitude for all the time and effort you've dedicated to our young person. Your contributions are invaluable, and I truly value the commitment you've shown. Thank you for your continued support and for investing your valuable time in the welfare of looked after children.

Feedback from a parent about an IRO

She was my son's IRO for the entirety of his time looked after. Although we didn't always agree on everything, which of course is to be expected, she did an amazing job as his IRO, always pushing for the best. And ensuring that he was paramount in everything.

She was a truly exceptional advocate for him and a very effective IRO...She made a real and tangible difference for the better.

Caseloads

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 58. 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.

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 in order for their IRO to understand their lived experience and ensure they are living in a suitable home.

Multi-agency Liaison & Quality Assurance

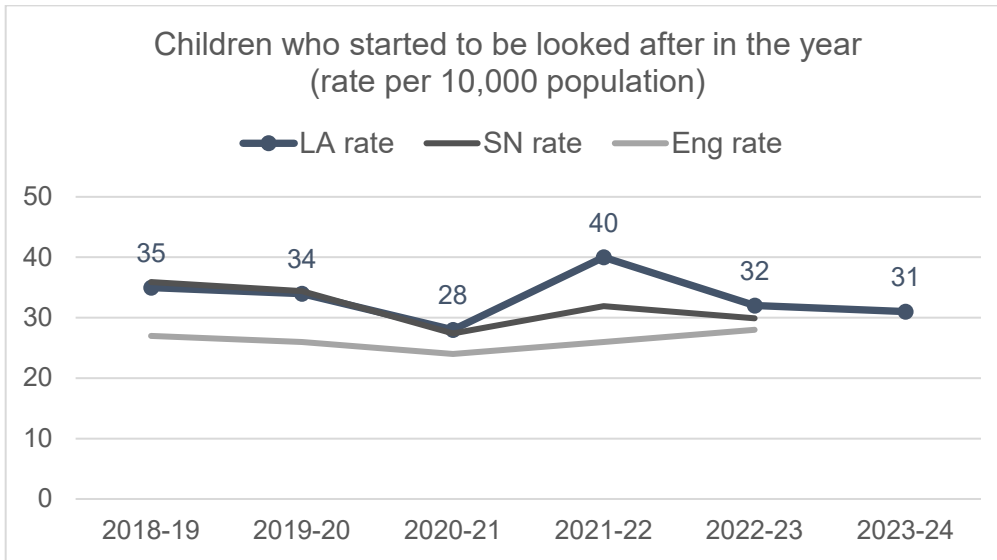
The Service Manager attends a weekly multi-agency meeting which focusses on the timeliness of PEPs, Initial Health Assessments and Review Health Assessments. There is an additional weekly meeting which scrutinises all children and young people in unregulated accommodation and/or subject of Deprivation of Liberty Orders (DoLS).

CAFCASS 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 CAFCASS. 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.

The IRO Service Manager attends the bi weekly Complex Needs Panel and monthly Permanence Taskforce as well as other strategic meetings.

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, Safeguarding and Family Support, Care and Permanency and 16+ Service.

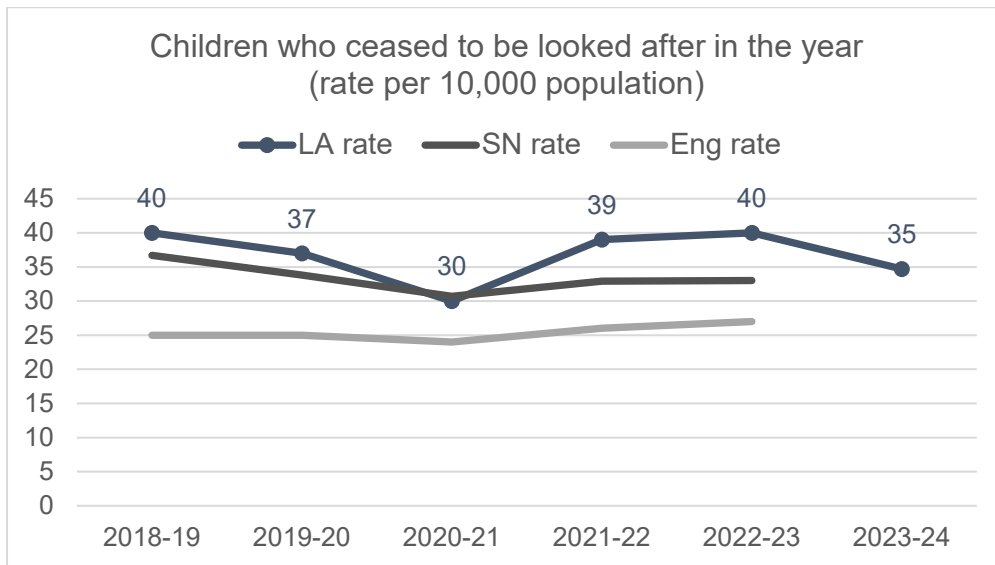
Profile of Southwark's Children & Young People



Graph1 - Source: SSDA903

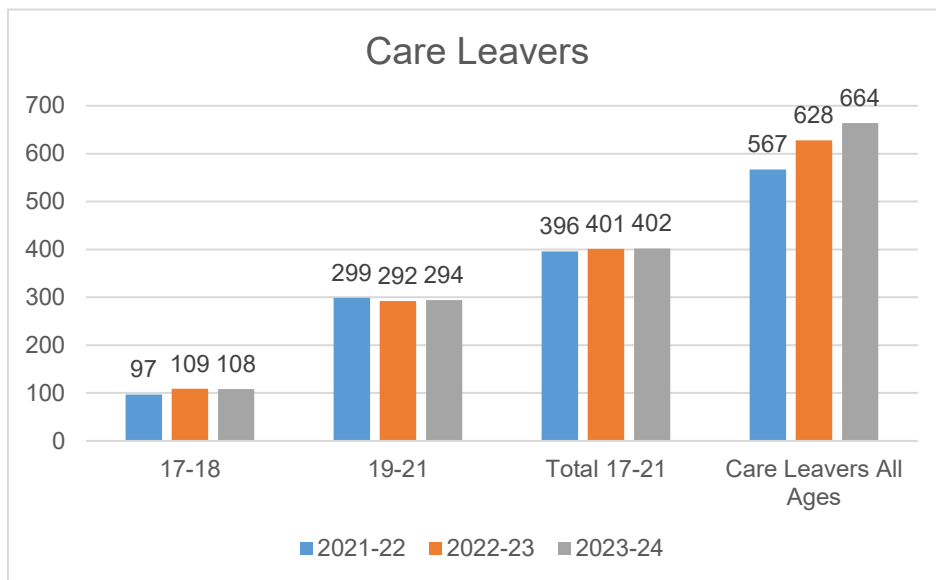
The graph above relates to the rates of children starting to be looked after and compares Southwark's rate of children entering care with our statistical neighbours and the national rate. Southwark's rate has decreased over 2023/24 and is now more in line with our statistical neighbours and the national average.

For IROs, manageable caseloads (as previously evidenced at 1.17) enable improved oversight, allowing time for midway reviews/ongoing monitoring of children 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

The graph above (Graph 2) shows the numbers of children leaving care by year (2018/19 to year end 2023/24). Last year saw a dip in the number of children leaving care (N=198), bringing our rate more in line with that of our statistical neighbours.



Graph 3 - Source: SSDA903 and Internal Performance Data

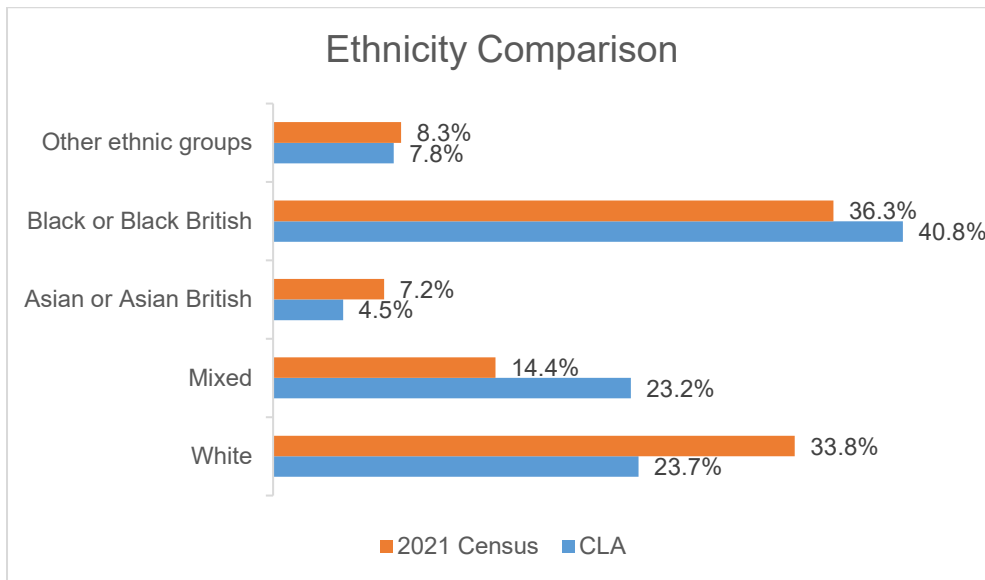
Care leaver numbers have increased, with a 17% increase across the three years shown above (n= 97). IROs have oversight of pathway planning for young people as they approach leaving care age and liaise closely with the 16+ Services. The 16+ Service is in touch with approximately 99.3% of care leavers 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 2022/23	Southwark 2021/22	Southwark 2022/23	Southwark 2023/24
CLA as at 31st March (n)	N/A	457	420	397
CLA as at 31st March per 10,000	67.1	69	63.7	69.7
CLA starting to 31st March (n)	N/A	228	182	177
CLA starting to 31st March per 10,000	29.9	40	27.6	31.0
CLA ceasing to 31st March (n)	N/A	223	215	198
CLA ceasing to 31st March per 10,000	33	39	32.6	34.7

Table 1 - Source: SSDA903

The table above (Table 1) shows children in care as at the 31st of March 2024 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.

As noted in the summary, children who are of Black or Black British ethnicity are over represented amongst our children in care (40.8% for 2023/24). 2021 census ethnicity information is used as proxy to show under or over represented ethnic groups. Within the 2021 census Black or Black British as an ethnicity account for 36.3%



Graph 4 - Source: SSSA903 and School Census

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 2022/23	Southwark 2022/23	Southwark 2022/23	Southwark 2023/24
White	31	23	22	23.7
Mixed	21	19	21	23.2
Asian or Asian British	9	7	5	4.5
Black or Black British	34	41	43	40.8
Other ethnic groups	6	10	9	7.8

Table 2 - Source: SSSA903

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. There has been a recent Learningfest week focused on anti-racist practice and disproportionality which included multiple learning and development events across the week and focused auditing. The audits completed show that there is further development needed in the understanding of intersectionality and anti-racist practice. This will be a focus in the coming year.

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.

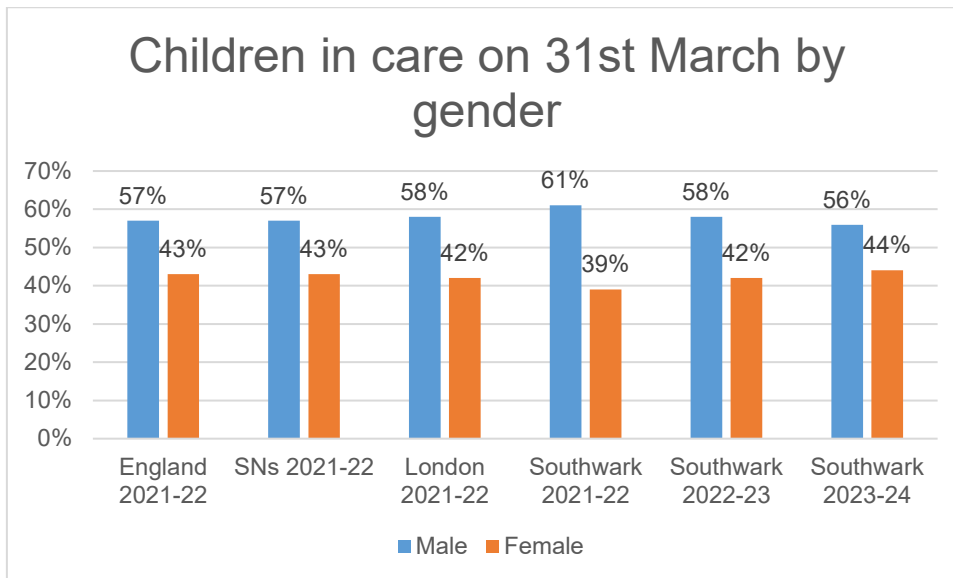
Strategic work is being undertaken to better understand the reasons behind the disproportionality and address the causes.

A bespoke and mandatory training programme was developed and commenced in September 2022 for all social work staff, inclusive of IROs which covered 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.

Southwark provided funding for 6 careleavers to undertake a mentoring programme. 5 of these young people started the programme but have decided not to continue as they were more interested in coaching and one young person has two more sessions to complete and once qualified 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.

The Life Long Links programme has now been established in Southwark. The aim of the programme is 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. IROs are working closely with the Life Long Links Team to identify children and young people who would benefit from engaging with the programme.

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: SSDA903

Southwark’s looked after children are proportionately older than our statistical neighbours and the inner London averages. The highest proportion are aged between 16 and over (43.6% at end of 2023/24, compared to 36% for our statistical neighbours).

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 by the second reviews for these children becomes critical.

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) or via Special Guardianship orders.

Children by age %	England	SNs	London	Southwark 2021/22	Southwark 2022/23	Southwark 2023/24
	Under 1	5%	5%	4%	4.0%	1.9%
1 to 4	20%	16%	13%	15.0%	8.0%	11.1%
5 to 9	12%	8%	8%	10.0%	8.0%	7.6%
10 to 15	14%	14%	14%	17.0%	20.0%	13.6%
16 and over	49%	56%	61%	53.0%	56.0%	65.7%

Table 3 - Source: SSDA903

Outcomes & Performance

Stability of Care

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.

Southwark have recently employed 2 permanent, part time, Permanence Leads who are focusing on looking at how Southwark can increase stability and permanence for children and young people. They are working with the IRO service to ensure IROs have a strong focus on permanence being achieved within the child's timescale and ongoing monitoring. There is a focus on ensuring that regular permanence planning meetings are taking place, that 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. It appears that changes in social workers and inconsistency of team managers in some services has had a significant effect on permanency planning meetings taking place and children and young people being matched with their carers. There is now greater oversight through the permanence leads chairing tracking panels in each service and a focus on permanency in supervision between the Service Manager and IROs.

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. The Clinical Service have been involved in developing a new stability and support form which focusses more holistically on the young person and carer's needs.

A new Powerbi dashboard has been developed which monitors the stability of young people. IROs now have access to this and it will provide greater oversight of the young people they are reviewing.

Where children were living (by placement type) as at the end of year 2024 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 England at 68%, and a good proportion of placements for children are with permanent foster carers.

Audit work completed with the Care and Permanency Service has shown that children in long term stable placements with committed carers do very well at school and socially.

Southwark is part of 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, to open in 2025. Placement sufficiency remains a national issue.

Children by Placement Type	England	SNs	London	Southwark	Southwark
	2022-23	2022-23	2022-23	2022-23	2023-24
Foster placements	68%	74%	72.0%	69.0%	68.5%
Concurrent planning foster placements	-	-	-	-	0.7%
Foster placements with relative(s) or friends(s)	-	-	-	22.8%	23.2%
Foster placements confirmed as permanent (long term)	-	-	-	37.6%	40.8%
Placed for adoption	2%	2%	1%	2.0%	0.5%
Placement with parents	7%	4%	4%	0.7%	0.8%
Other placement in the community	3%	2%	2%	-	-
Children's homes, secure units and hostels	17%	17%	21%	26.0%	23.2%
Other residential settings	2%	3%	3%	2.0%	1.5%
Residential schools	-	0%	-	-	-
Other placements	1%	0%	-	-	5.5%

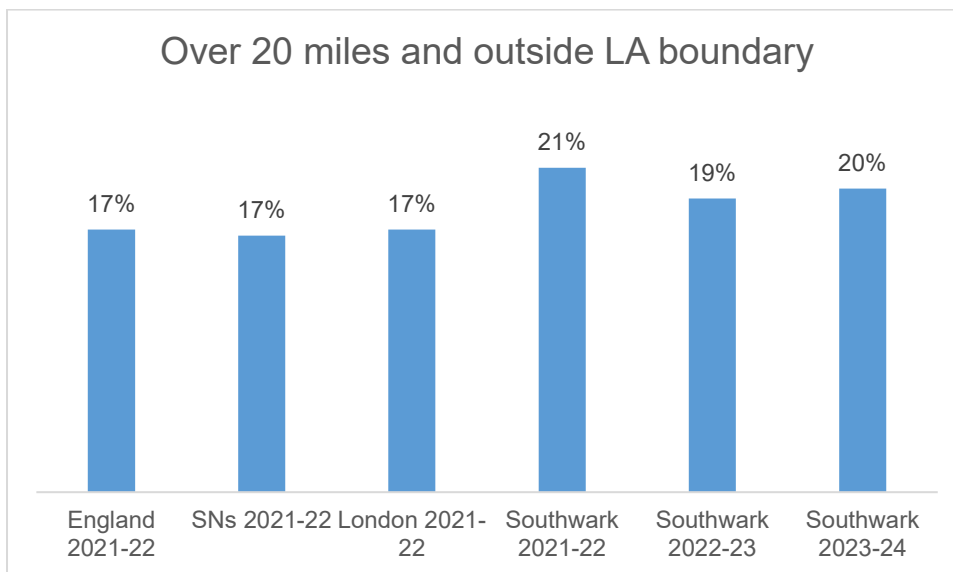
Table 4 - Source: SSSA903

Stability of Care	SNs 2022-23	London 2022-23	Southwark 2022/23	Southwark 2023/24
% of children with 3+ placements	9%	10%	12.0%	13.6%
% of children in care for 2.5 years in placement for 2 years +	71%	69%	64.0%	63.4%

Table 5 - Source: SSDA903

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.

It is hoped that through opening a residential home and semi independent accommodation in Southwark in the near future we will be able to meet the needs of more young people within their local community.



Graph 6 - Source: SSDA903

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.

Whilst the majority of children and young people have an up to date annual health assessment (97.5% as at the end of year 2024), the timeliness of initial health assessments requires monitoring. There is a weekly meeting to address this which is chaired by the Assistant Director, the timeliness of initial health assessments continues to increase and is currently at 72%.

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 84.4%. The vast majority of children in care have a contemporary SDQ score (73.4%), 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.

Audits continue to show that IROs are addressing health assessments in reviews to inform review recommendations. IROs report that they find the Health Summaries incredibly informative and useful when undertaking reviews. SDQ results need to be used more consistently 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	SNs	London	Southwark 2022-23	Southwark 2023-24
Number of children whose immunisations were up to date	82%	74%	74%	65.0%	69.1%
Number of children who had their teeth checked by a dentist	76%	74%	76%	76.0%	84.4%
Number of children who had their annual health assessment	89%	91%	91%	98.0%	97.5%
Children looked after for at least 12 months aged 4 to 16 with an SDQ score	75%	82%	82%	85.0%	73.4%
Average score per child	14	14	14	13.5	14.4

Table 6- Source: SSDA903

Educational Achievement & Attainment

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 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

Please see the below table for GCSE School results.

	2020	2021	2022	2023 - 2024
GCSE English Standard, 9-4	32%	27%	47%	40%
GCSE English Strong, 9-5	26%	16%	17%	25%
GCSE Maths Standard, 9-4	13%	27%	17%	16%
GCSE Maths Strong, 9-5	7%	20%	15%	8%

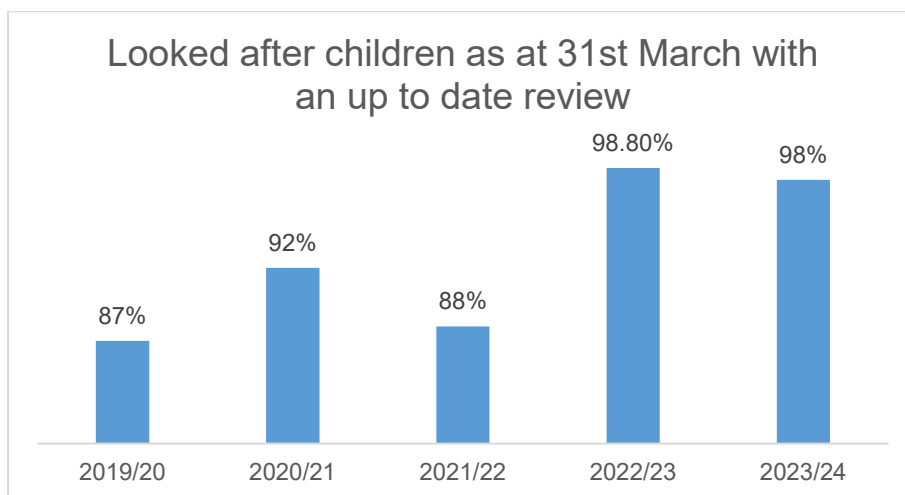
A record 14 students will be progressing onto university undergraduate courses or degree level apprenticeships this year. 1 student will be progressing onto an undergraduate (+ masters) degree level apprenticeship with one of the 'Big 4' leading accounting firms in the world, 9 students will be progressing onto a course at their first choice University and 1 student will be continuing on at their Level 3 apprenticeship with a placement at a manufacturing company.

Children & Young People's Reviews

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.

The Care Plan and IRO minutes were reviewed in 2022 and all care and pathway plans should now be 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. The letter to the young person captures the parts of the meeting the young person identifies as being important to them and also focusses on the softer details such as what the young person is interested in, their achievements and what they've been doing. This will form part of a young person's life story work and help them to understand their journey through care and how and why decisions were made, as well as personal details about themselves that may otherwise be lost. Feedback from young people has been positive.

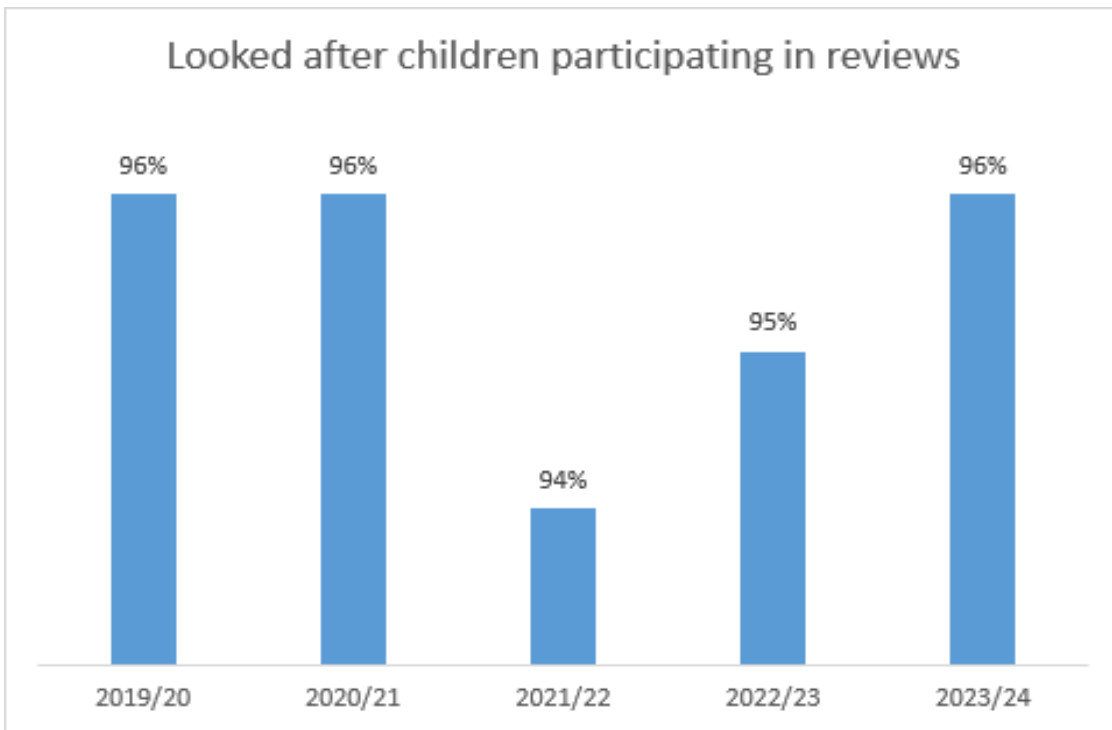
Of the looked after children as at 31st March 2024, 98% had an up to date review. This is thought to be as a result of stability within the IRO service and timely notifications when children and young people become looked after. (see Graph 7 and Table 7).



Graph 7- Source: SSDA903

Reviews for Children Looked After	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
No. of children looked after for 20+ working days at 31st March	444	439	408	391
(of the above) No. of children with reviews held in timescale	407	394	403	383
% of children with reviews held in timescale	92	88	98.8	98
Total no. of reviews held in the year for all children & young people	1264	1222	1158	1055

Table 7 - Source: SSDA903



Graph 8 - Source: SSDA903

Children & Young People’s Views

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. 96% of young people engaged with their review, those that did not tended to be young people who were missing or absent from where they were living or older teenagers. IROs in this situation will continue to reach out and attempt to creatively engage young people but this may be outside the review window and therefore will not be recorded in the statistics. 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. Some young people have also chosen to use an advocate or their carer to share their views. A website for young people in care and careleavers is in development and this will be an additional medium where they can share their views.

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.

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.

Regular consultations take place with Speakerbox to involve children and young people in evaluating practice.

Children's Rights Officer & Speakerbox

Speakerbox, our Children in Care Council for care experienced young people, 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.*

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. The team was nominated in two categories in the Southwark Staff Awards and they won the Extra Mile Award which was a huge endorsement of the fantastic work they do with children and young people! Speakerbox have also been named as one of the three chosen charities/organisations supported by the Mayor of Southwark which we are very excited about and grateful for.

The work on a Speakerbox Website is now underway and there is a landing page with the content being developed. Young people have been involved in the design of the new Speakerbox Logo and the content for the website. We hope the first phase will be completed by December 2024 and will be a helpful source of information and support for children, young people, carers and professionals.

The Children's Rights Officers have been focusing on Speakerbox becoming a more strategic platform for change with mechanisms for reporting in to the senior leadership team. They have been raising the importance of a Council wide approach to corporate parenting responsibilities and young people recently met with Directors from across the Council and raised their eight key priorities which are housing, finance, education, care, employment, accessibility, opportunities and immigration.

Throughout 2023/24 Speakerbox have continued to shape practice and influence decision making through various means such as developing and delivering training, involvement in Learningfest, recruitment of staff, consultations, attending training workshops, attending events/programmes and campaigning. Over the course of the year there were 1559 episodes where young people participated via Speakerbox, a 55% increase from 1005 episodes the previous year. 78% of these episodes were with young people aged 14-25 years and 22% were under 13 years old.

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 feed back how much children and young people bring to the process and how insightful they are.

Over the past year children and young people have been continuing to work on their Identity campaign and have also started a campaign called 'Home'. They have created a film about their experiences of being in foster care and this will be used in social worker and foster carer training in the future. Young people have been involved in the recruitment of foster carers and have featured in a social media campaign and film. Young people have worked with a music producer and DJ to record tracks about what 'Home' means to them and a group of Under 13s made a super hero comic.

They were involved in many consultations some of which included the re-commissioning of the advocacy and independent visitor service, input into developing the SEND strategy, developing the young people's guide for Olive House, Southwark's new Residential Home and being consulted about the design of the property and furnishings. They have also engaged in a graffiti workshop and designed and created artwork for Southwark Council buildings and Olive House.

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.

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.

One of our Children's Rights Officers has founded the Innovation Project alongside the manager of the Family Council. This is a space where young people, parents and staff from across Children's Services come together to come up with creative solutions to practice issues. There has been a recent focus on understanding financial entitlements.

Speakerbox have been planning activities and events throughout 2023/24 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 football skills programme, and trips to escape rooms, bowling, Thorpe Park and Legoland.

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 13s, young people with additional needs, young people in custodial and residential settings and young people living out of borough.

Advocacy and Independent Visitors

IROs signpost all children and young people to advocacy services and are proactive in making referrals and encourage children and young people to make referrals themselves 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.

The contract with Coram Voice, who were commissioned to provide advocacy and Independent Visiting services to children and young people in Southwark ended on the 30th March 2024. There was a big piece of work across 2022/23 to prepare the tender for the new contract. Care experienced young people were closely involved in the process and were invited to participate in a consultation to hear about what was important to them when accessing advocacy and independent visitors. Children's Services staff and the Children's Rights Officers were also involved in sharing their views. This informed the service specifications and young people then developed questions for providers and sat on an interview panel for organisations who had bid for the contract. The advocacy contract is now provided by Barnardos. Coram Voice will retain the Independent Visitor contract until it comes in house to Southwark on the 1st January 2025.

In respect of advocacy, in 2023/24, Coram Voice provided advocacy to 117 children and young people. This is a reduction by 27 from the previous year. Coram provided 1730.14 hours of advocacy compared to the previous years total of 1956.99. The decrease in hours is partially due to working with less young people as well as a more active approach to monitoring the advocacy hours and the 2 children's rights officers and Service Manager working with the social work teams and advocates to resolve issues more swiftly.

Coram received 78 new referrals and completed 117 closures (ceasing advocacy). In addition, 6 children and young people were provided with advocacy funded by Coram Voice Outreach and Always Heard.

A high proportion of children who have a disability accessed advocacy services in 2023/24. 48.72% of children and young people who used the service throughout the period identified as having a disability. Coram have specialist advocates who are able to provide non instructed advocacy when needed.

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 were higher users of advocacy than those young people in borough, 66 young people vs 45. Black or Black British African young people were the highest users of advocacy followed by White British young people.

The predominant issues raised via advocacy are shown below.

ISSUE	No.
Housing	57
Complaint	47
Concerns about social worker/Personal Advisor	41
Education, training and employment	30
Finance, Benefits and Debt	19
Pathway Planning – request for a plan	15
Other	17

Children and young people were concerned about getting the right support at the right time, particularly with educational and housing needs, complaints and around the level of finances received as well as support to manage these.

More active monitoring of the work done by Coram took place over the past year, 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 ensure a more speedy resolution of issues where practicable.

In respect of Independent Visitors, Coram Voice provided 25 children and young people with an independent visiting service with 111 recorded face to face visits between young people and their independent visitors across the year with 382 hours spent with children and young people. Independent Visitors were really thoughtful about activities they undertook with young people, offering them a variety of new experiences such as visiting museums and exhibitions, bike rides, escape rooms, meals out and dog walks. There were a broad range of different age groups accessing the independent visiting service with 4 children aged under 13 years and 16 children aged 14-20 years. 63% 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 feels like family, like an auntie almost. It's nice to have someone I can talk to about anything.'

'My IV is very funny. I like having him because he gets me out the house.'

'My IV gets injured sometimes because he plays rugby, but he always still turns up to see me.'

Feedback from foster carers about independent visitors

'My young person really values their relationship with their IV. They are very good match. Our young person really enjoys the time they spend together and looks forward to each visit.'

'They have bonded. The young person was initially hesitant to try new things and go to new places, but this relationship has really warmed up, the young person is more open to new experiences.'

Monitoring & Escalation

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.

IROs generally have good links and relationships with team managers, service managers and heads of services and are encouraged to talk through issues, rather than emailing. This has resulted in swifter resolution of issues. There has been a significant drop in informal escalations and IROs report that this is due to them not consistently recording the conversations they've had using the case alert on Mosaic. It is likely that therefore the number of informal alerts is actually much higher and we are working on IROs consistently recording their footprint. IROs had to cover significant sickness issues throughout 2023/24 and this has had an impact on both their recording and oversight as caseloads increased for a significant period. IROs will firstly seek to resolve issues informally, and this is evidenced by data which shows that from 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 there were 65 case alerts (on Mosaic) by IROs resulting in resolution at an earlier stage necessitating far fewer higher level escalations.

There have been high levels of monitoring of progression of care planning for young people but this hasn't always been recorded or followed through formally as an escalation. IROs need ensure they have a consistent approach to informal and formal escalations and this is something we are working on as a service.

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.

The table below (Table 8) shows escalations made to year end 2023/24 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 safeguarding concerns. **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	2
LAC Inadequate care plan	3
LAC Social work provision concerns	1
LAC Placement concerns	2
LAC Education concerns	1
LAC Other	1
LAC Incomplete review decisions	1
LAC Safeguarding concerns	3

Table 8 - Source: Mosaic

From April 1st 2023 to March 31st 2024 IROs have made 12 formal escalations to managers. One escalation (8%) was escalated to stage 2 to Assistant Director to be resolved. The escalation form is in the process of being redeveloped as the current form is not as widely used as it should be. There have been delays with implementing the change to the form due to resourcing issues. No issues were referred to CAFCASS, although as stated, IROs work in close liaison with Guardians for independent oversight of care planning.

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. We have undertaken lunch time learning sessions throughout the year and one outcome is the change the escalation and midway review forms to make them more use friendly, streamlined and focused on the impact on the child.

Update on 2022/23 priorities

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 – *the sessions took place and were extended, practice guidance to be finalised. Further sessions are planned*

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 and IROs have met with various social work services and ongoing meetings are planned. The Service Manager has also attended performance meetings with various services.*

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 – *this has been partially achieved, there have been delays due to capacity to develop and modify Mosaic forms and further work is required and should be completed by the end of the year.*

The service will continue to focus on maintaining the timeliness of children's looked after reviews – *achieved and ongoing.*

There will be closer oversight and monitoring of stability and permanence for children and young people – *this is an ongoing piece of work and further sessions are planned with the new permanence leads in October 2024.*

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 – *this has been partially achieved, there have been delays due to capacity to develop and modify Mosaic forms and further work is required and should be completed by the end of the year .*

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 – *achieved and ongoing.*

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 – *achieved and ongoing.*

Developmental Work for 2024/25

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 2024/25;

- Obtaining 360 feedback from young people, families and professionals about their experience of the review to enable the service to build on it's strengths and respond to young people and families voices and feedback. Feedback forms to be distributed following the review and the Service Manager to observe at least one review per year for each IRO and to contact a selection of children and families following reviews
- To work with the social work services to change the culture of care plans and pathways plans often being provided late for reviews and dates being changed at the last minute due to social worker availability. To also improve the timeliness of IROs recording the reviews within statutory timescales
- Midway Review form to be redeveloped to ensure there is a consistent approach and the recording of ongoing monitoring and oversight
- To complete the redevelopment of the escalation forms so there is a consistent, timely and child focused approach to resolving issues for children and young people
- To ensure young people and families consistently receive the care plans and records of the review by considering whether there could be funding for a convener in the IRO service. This would also reduce social worker and IRO administrative burdens and enable them to spend more time with children and young people
- There will be closer oversight and monitoring of stability and permanence for children and young people and a consistent approach to escalating if there is drift and delay. There is now a Permanency Lead linked to the IRO service who we will work closely with
- Speakerbox now has two Children's Rights and Participation Officers. With this increased capacity they have expanded their reach and are focusing on a more strategic approach and joint working with other services and areas across the Council to increase opportunities for children and young people and ensure their voices are heard and amplified and contribute to service design and development

