



Independent Reviewing Service

Annual Report

April 2019 – March 2020

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Executive Summary

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

Over the past year, Surrey Children's Services (CS) continue to make strides on their improvement journey, since the inadequate judgement by Ofsted in 2018.

Further to a significant organisational restructure the Independent Reviewing Service now sits within the Quality and Performance Service. The Independent Chairs Service sits alongside the LADO service, the Independent Visitor Service and the Audit and Practice Standards Team. The Independent Chairs now operate from within the four quadrants with management oversight and supervision provided from a Service Co-Ordinator, which are new positions created under the restructure.

A further decision within the restructure was to introduce the dual role for chairs, with a new title of Independent Chairs incorporating both the IRO and Child Protection Chair roles. The rationale behind the change of role was to create consistency in practice and to ensure that the Independent Chairs have the requisite skills to chair both Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Reviews. To support this change a series of Action Learning Sets with an Independent Consultant have been implemented and extended.

Of the current establishment 73% of the Independent Chairs are carrying out the dual role whilst other members of the service are working towards this with their Service Coordinators. The average workload per 1.0FTE is 51. All independent Chairs recruited since this time have taken up the dual role within the service. These changes have led to changes of staff some of whom did not wish to take on the new dual role, this has inevitably led to a change of Independent Chair for some of our children.

During the past year, there has been increasing numbers of children who need to be cared for by Surrey CS leading to more Looked After Children reviews. Key performance headlines from this reporting period includes: a small drop in the timeliness of reviews and more care planning alerts have been completed, the majority of these have been for a social work report/assessment not being completed for the Looked After Child review, followed by the case drifting or a plan not being implemented in a timely way.

Alongside this, over the past year, Independent Chairs have maintained a high number of children being involved in their reviews and this has remained above 90% throughout this period. The IRO service has implemented progress updates in-between reviews, which have led to increased oversight of children's care planning and increased the quality assurance footprint on children's files. Independent Chairs are working on ensuring outcomes are

based on a child's developmental needs and are SMART. Independent Chairs have also changed how they write their reports, beginning to write these directly to children, making them more accessible to them now and in the future. We recognise there is further work to do within this area and are seeking to write letters to children after their reviews in a style that is meaningful to them, we know this has been well received in other authorities.

Our improvement priorities for the coming year are to improve our consistency of completing progress updates and ensuring children's voices are at the core of these. We must continue to progress our improvement in SMART plans and being able to provide assurances these are child focused and based on a child's developmental needs. We want the whole service to write their reports as letters to children and the timeliness of the completion of these records to improve. We want to robustly ensure timely permanence decisions are made for our children. We want to strengthen and clearly evidence the IRO challenge function. Our focus over the coming year will be to ensure that children, and their voices are at the centre of all our planning. How we improve on these areas is set out in our Independent Chairs Action Plan.

1. The Legal Context and Purpose of the Service

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

The statutory duties of the IRO are to [section 25B (1), 1989 Act]:

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

The core tasks of the IRO are defined as:

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

the quality of the authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should alert senior managers. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice.

2. The Surrey Context

Surrey is a relatively affluent county with a population of over 1.1 million and a child population of over 260,000. The population is predominantly white (90%), with relatively small numbers from Asian (5.6%); Black (1.1%); and mixed (2.1%) backgrounds.

Surrey's strategy is set out in the [2030 Community Vision for Surrey](#). The ambition is for children and young people to have a great start in life; to be healthy; to be safe and feel safe and to feel confident in their futures.

Since 2018, Surrey CS have been transforming how they deliver social care with a wholesale restructuring of the social work service. Under the leadership of a new senior management team, this has included implementing a Family Resilience (early help approach), Family Safeguarding (social work practice) model, a No Wrong Door approach and the Mockingbird model in fostering.

During this past year, Ofsted have completed a series of monitoring visits, with the most recent being in January 2020. During this visit which focused on plans for children the Inspectors found evidence of progress as outlined in the monitoring visit letter. They were able to see improvements in both the timeliness and quality of interventions. They saw thresholds were more appropriately managed and that caseloads were more manageable. They found practitioners to be confident, skilled and enthusiastic when talking about children and their work. Due to the recent outbreak of COVID 19 the Ofsted monitoring visit arranged for April 2020 has been postponed.

3. The IRO Service in Surrey

The IRO team is now part of the Quality and Performance Service, has moved into quadrant-based teams and is now a dual role, incorporating the IRO and Child Protection Chair role.

There are 26.7 full time equivalent Independent Chairs and caseloads are within the recommended range as set out in the IRO Handbook (2011). Within the team, there is a range of specialist knowledge and expertise, including knowledge of children with disabilities, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), care leavers and fostering.

4. Our Looked After Children - demographics

As of March 2020, there were 984 children who were looked after by Surrey CC.

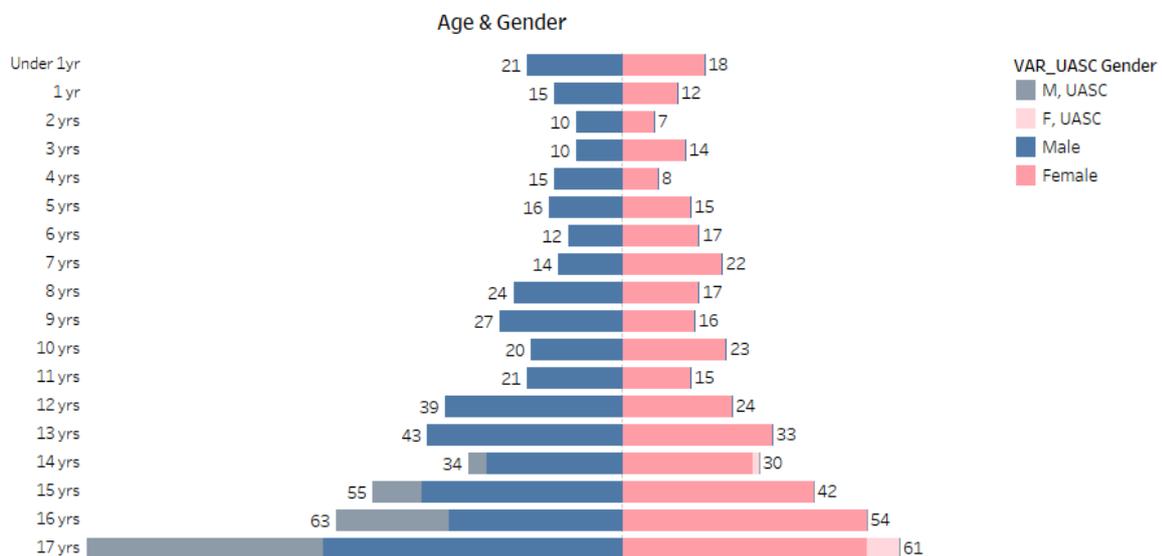
The table below shows there is an increasing number of children who need to be looked after by Surrey CC, and this figure is the highest it has been in the past year. In March 2020, Surrey CC had 106 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), which is 11% of the children currently looked after by the local authority.

The Number of Children Looked After by Surrey County Council in 2019/2020

	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Number of Looked After Children	972	957	954	944	958	962	974	972	974	968	975	980	984
Of which UASC	114	115	114	111	119	118	120	123	120	123	114	112	108

Surrey’s looked after children are 57% male and 43% female. The graph below shows the age and gender of Surrey’s looked after children.

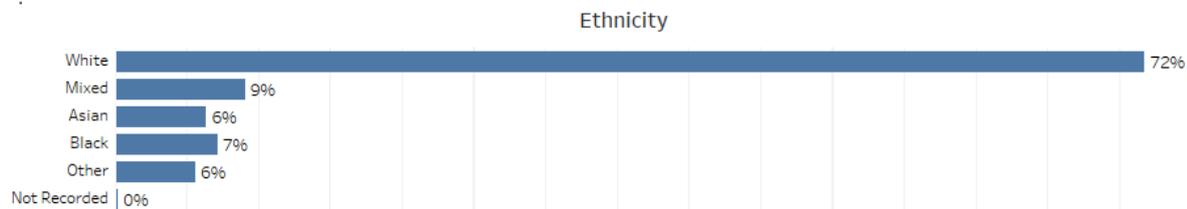
The Age and Gender of Surrey’s Looked After Children



The age profile of children in Surrey has stayed broadly the same since last year and are broadly in line with national figures.

The graph below shows the ethnicity of looked after children in Surrey. Surrey's looked after children are predominantly White (72%), with relatively small numbers from mixed (9%), Asian (6%), Black (7%) and other (6%) backgrounds.

Ethnicity of Surrey's Looked After Children

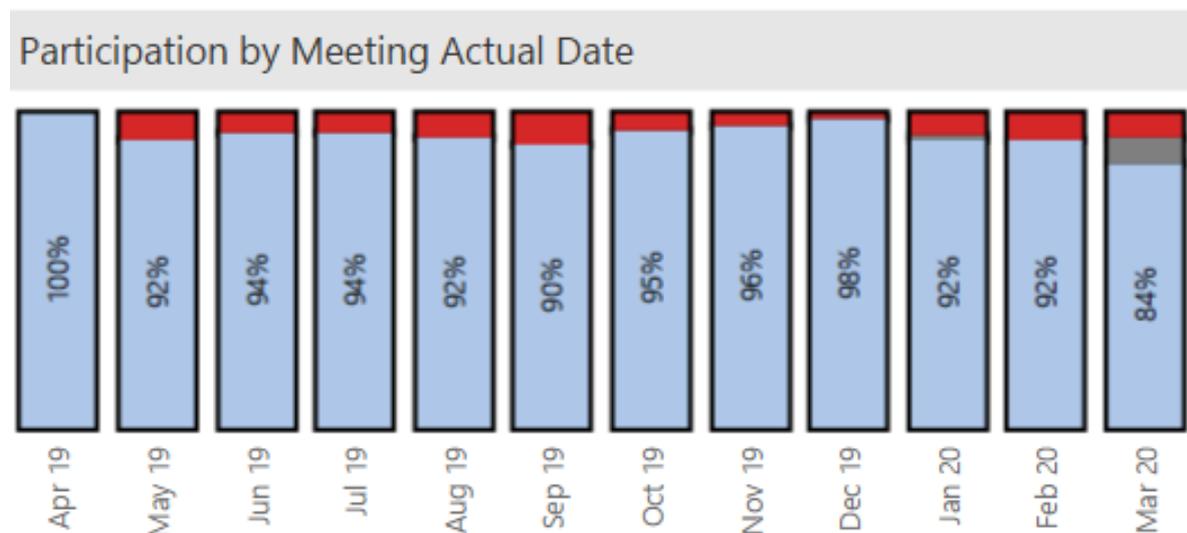


5. IRO Service Performance

Independent Chairs undertook 2714 reviews over the past year. This is a slight increase from the previous year, where 2701 reviews were conducted. 262 children have ceased to be Looked After, with some children being adopted, some returning home, some moving into Special Guardianship arrangements and some moving onto adult services.

The graph below highlights the number of children who participated in their reviews each month over the past year. Children's participation in the decision making processes of their lives is fundamental and directly related to good outcomes. Children can participate in their reviews in a number of ways, this could be by attending the formal meeting, meeting separately with the chair, or attending one of a series of meetings, set up in line with the child's wishes. On average, 93% of children aged over 4 years participated in their Looked After Child Reviews, 6% of children did not participate and 1% were not recorded. This has stayed stable from the previous year, which was also 93%.

Participation of Children in their Looked After Child Reviews



The children who did not participate in their review process or for who it was not recorded were either missing at the time of their meeting, are severely disabled or chose not to participate. The other children who had reviews during this period were under 4 years old. Participation within the review process is not captured for children under the age of 4 years and the lower participation rate for March 2020 is due to a time delay in recording for some children. To support increased participation, the Local Authority are looking at commissioning an advocacy service for children through Coram Voice.

Once a child becomes looked after, the first review should take place within 20 working days, with the second review taking place within three months of the first review and the third and subsequent reviews are held within six months of the previous review.

As of the 31st March 2020, 97% (961 of 986) of children had their reviews within the timescale. This is a reduction from last year, where 99.6% had their reviews conducted in time. This figure remains above the target of 95%.

Independent Chairs have 5 working days to complete their outcomes or recommendations from the Looked After Child Review and 15 working days to complete the review record following the completion of the review process. The review process could span a period of 20 working days if the review is completed as a series of meetings and a decision to conduct the review as a series of meetings will be led by the views of the child. Ensuring that outcomes and review records are consistently completed in timescales is an area we will continue to focus on in the coming year.

The service continues to apply a robust approach on improving the quality of the records we produce through the Service Coordinator quality assurance oversight.

Over the past year, Independent Chairs continue to develop the quality of their outcomes and recommendations, ensuring these are SMART and based on a child's developmental needs.

The service has developed the quality of report writing over this period, with part of the service moving from writing reports in the more traditional sense to writing these in the first person and to children. This assists in making reports more accessible to children both now and in the future. This progress will continue to be implemented across the service over the coming months to develop a consistent response to children.

A key function of the Independent Chairs is to drive the plan for permanence from the second review onwards. This is an area which is raised and discussed in Looked After Child reviews by Independent Chairs. As part of our improvement plan, we will be looking at evidence of Independent Chairs robustly and constructively challenging practice in the area of permanence through the escalation process. Service Coordinators will also be attending Permanency Planning Meetings to ensure we achieve permanence in a timely way for every child.

In addition to the formal reviews, the service continues to embed progress updates between reviews, initially these took place between the Social Worker and Independent Chair. In the latter part of this year, these now include children, ensuring it is the child who guides the Independent Chairs challenge. Over the coming year we will be looking to improve the consistency of these with the help of improved data that is being developed as a result of the end to end review in LCS (our electronic social care records).

6. Dispute Resolution

The [IRO handbook](#) requires the Local Authority to have an identified local 'Dispute Resolution Process' to raise concerns about a child's care planning with the operational teams. In Surrey CS, we call this our 'Care Planning Alert Process' (CPA).

Initially, this process involves raising the issue with the social worker and team manager and seeking an informal resolution. If this is not successful, then a written alert will be raised.

There are different stages within the process:

- Stage 1 = Team Manager
- Stage 2 = Service Manager
- Stage 3 = Assistant Director
- Stage 4 = Director
- Stage 5 = Executive Director
- Stage 6 = CAFCASS

The CPA process will also be used to raise alerts and concerns with partner agencies where the Independent Chair is of the view they are not fulfilling their corporate parenting responsibilities.

During the past year, the care planning alert process was completed for 261 children. This is an increase on the past year, when it was raised for 240 children. The graph below shows the number of care planning alerts raised within each category. The majority of alerts were for a social work report not being completed for the Looked After Child review, followed by the case drifting or a plan not being implemented in a timely way. Alerts can be classified under multiple categories.



All alerts were satisfactory concluded. Over the coming year we will be attempting to strengthen the evaluation of the number of informal alerts recorded during this process to be able to have a clearer understanding of the escalations which are made and the impact the IRO service is having to seek to resolve issues for children at the earliest opportunity. Further work is required to ensure care planning alerts align with a lack of compliance with our children’s practice standards and can evidence a reduction of drift and delay to the child.

7. Summary and Next Steps

It has been a challenging year for the IRO service. This has meant changes of Independent Chair for some of our children.

Whilst acknowledging a number of challenges within the system including changes of social workers for children looked after, Independent Chairs have maintained a high number of

children being involved in their reviews and encouraged children to co-chair reviews when they have wished to do so.

The IRO service has implemented children's participation within progress updates in-between reviews, which have led to increased oversight of children's care planning and has also increased the service's footprint on children's files.

Some areas for progression within the service include:

- Improvement in the quality of CLA plans to ensure they are SMART, and outcome focused and compliant with the new family safeguarding model
- Increased evidence of effective and consistent challenge from the Independent Chair service
- Increased evidence of IRO oversight and challenge around placement stability and breakdowns
- Adequate and consistent staffing capacity within the Independent Chair workforce to deliver a high-quality service
- Visibility on every child's file that the IRO has taken forward a care planning progress update
- Consistency in the style of reporting on the child's looked after review
- Strengthening of the links with the Corporate Parenting Board
- Strengthening our liaison with the Children in Care council
- Strengthening the links with the User Voice and Participation Service; one of our Independent Chairs is in the process of becoming a champion for the service
- Commissioning an advocacy service from Coram Voice for our Looked After Children
- Continuing to learn from complaints to support improved practice
- Seeking to strengthen the links between our service and the YOS Service, with a YOS LAC champion
- Driving permanency forward for children looked after, new arrangements are in place for the service coordinators to attend PPM.