



**Independent Reviewing Service**

**Annual Report**

**April 2020 – March 2021**

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## Executive Summary

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

The last year has been a difficult year due to the COVID pandemic. However, despite this Surrey remained committed to continuing the improvement journey of service delivery to children and families in need of care and support, as commented on in the latest Ofsted Assurance visit

In March 2021 Ofsted completed a focussed visit and recognised the significant improvement journey. A number of strengths and improvements were identified, as well as some ongoing areas of focus for the local authority. Ofsted commented that *“Senior leaders have good oversight of and grip on the quality of social work practice. Extensive auditing and detailed performance information have enabled leaders to identify patterns, including service strengths as well as areas for improvement, and this continues to shape improvement plans”*.

Furthermore, the inspectors also commented that for looked after children *“In Surrey, there is a clear focus on meeting the emotional needs of children in care and care leavers. There is early access to a range of emotional well-being services as well as a dedicated CAMHS team for children in care. The local authority has supported children to remain in contact with their families effectively during the pandemic. Social workers mainly continue to visit children in person, alongside the use of virtual contact. Personal advisers demonstrate a real commitment to keeping in touch with care leavers through telephone calls and visits. Care leavers have been well supported by professional networks. Foster carers spoken to are positive about the support they received from the local authority during the pandemic<sup>1</sup>.”*

For the Independent Reviewing Service (referred to as the Service throughout this report), we maintained service delivery, achieving 100% of timeliness of children's looked after reviews. Adjustments and adaptations were made, using technology available to the Service to undertake virtual reviews. Following the easing of 3<sup>rd</sup> lockdown, the Service moved to reintroducing face to face reviews, where this could be held safely, adhering to government guidance. Staff who were shielding continued to hold virtual reviews, to keep them safe.

The dual role is now embedded across the Service, with majority of staff allocated to children who are looked after as well as children subject to child protection plans.

Since the last IRO Annual report was prepared the Independent Reviewing Service has implemented a new format of writing review records to children following their meetings, in the style of letter writing, directly to the child.

Our improvement priorities remain similar to the previous year, continuing to embed improvement in practice and performance, monitored through our Service Plan, to support children achieving better outcomes through care plans that meet their needs and achieving permanence in a timely manner. We will continue to keep children at the centre of our planning and delivery of our service, ensuring their voices are heard.

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<sup>1</sup> [50162959 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

## 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.

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

- chairing the child's review; and
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Surrey Context

Surrey is the third largest home county and third most populated county in the Southeast, after Hampshire and Kent. Surrey has an overall population of about 1.2million people. There are estimated to be 71,000 children aged under 5 in Surrey (6.0% of the population); 175,300 children aged 5-16 (14.8% of the population); and 105,100 people aged 17-24 making up almost a tenth of the population (8.9%). The population is predominantly white (90%), with relatively small numbers from Asian (5.6%); Black (1.1%); and mixed (2.1%) backgrounds.

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[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/337568/iro\\_statutory\\_guidance\\_iros\\_and\\_las\\_march\\_2010\\_tagged.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337568/iro_statutory_guidance_iros_and_las_march_2010_tagged.pdf)

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

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

Surrey published their [Corporate Parenting Strategy](#) and the [Local Offer for Care Leavers](#), which is accessible online.

Tragically Surrey suffered a great loss with the sudden and unexpected death of Dave Hill, Executive Director for Children Schools & Learning in June 2020. The Leadership Team worked tirelessly together during this difficult time to continue with Dave's vision of improving service delivery to children and families in Surrey. We have embedded the Family Resilience (early help approach) and continue to embed and strengthen the Family Safeguarding Model as our chosen model of social work practice.

The Mockingbird model in Fostering has established 3 hubs and another to be launched this Summer. Due to the COVID pandemic there has been a delay in the 'No Wrong Door' service being implemented, although it is envisaged this will be operational by the Autumn.

Children's Services is working to their 'Getting to Good' Plan which outlines key areas of focus and improvement, including for their looked after children and care leavers, formulated on feedback from Ofsted during monitoring visits and detailed monthly audit programme in place which identifies areas of strength and improvement to focus on. This is reviewed weekly and updated to keep a focus on improving service delivery and the outcomes for children, young people and families who are receiving services and support from Children's Services.

### 3. The Independent Reviewing Service in Surrey

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

Currently there are 27.5 full time equivalent (FTE) Independent Chairs (72% of permanent staff) 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.

There has been some changes in staff during the first half of the year, which unfortunately impacted on some children, as this meant a change in their Independent Chair. However the staff group has since stabilised more and some agency staff have or are in the process of progressing to permanent positions and we are recruiting to fill the remaining vacancies (2.5FTE) within our service, to create stability for looked after children

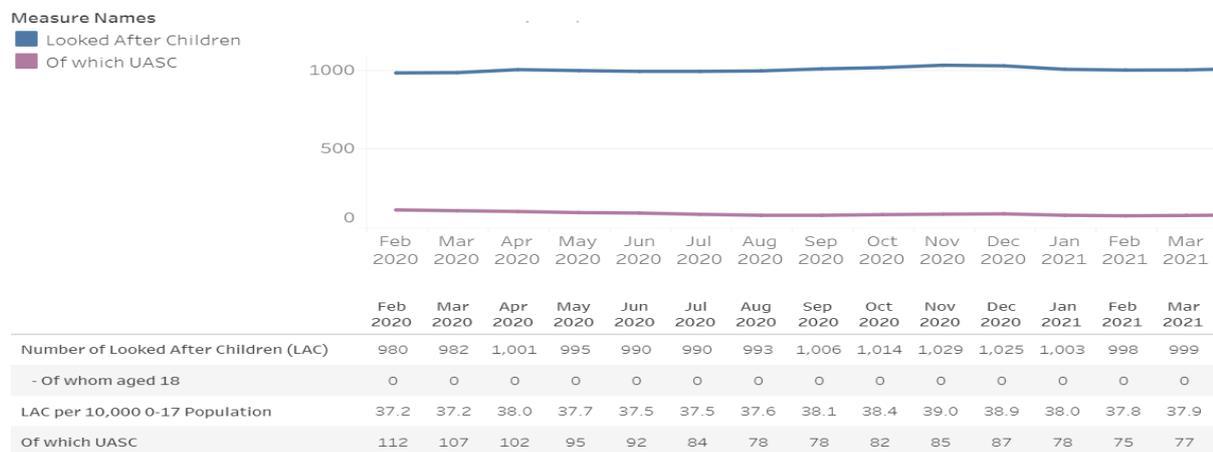
#### 4. Our Looked After Children – demographics during 2020/2021

At the end of March 2021 999 children were looked after and 757 Care Leavers were receiving support from Surrey. The overall number of children looked after has increased from the previous reporting year, although the cohort of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children had decreased, which is likely due to COVID pandemic and limitation on international travel.

424 Children became looked after during the reporting year, which includes 45 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; and 408 children ceased to be looked after, which includes 75 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The children ceased to be looked after due variety of reasons, such as majority turning 18 and either living independently or in staying put arrangements; children being adopted or being permanently placed under Special Guardianship Orders; or children returned to the care of their birth parents.

##### 4.1 The Number of Children Looked After

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

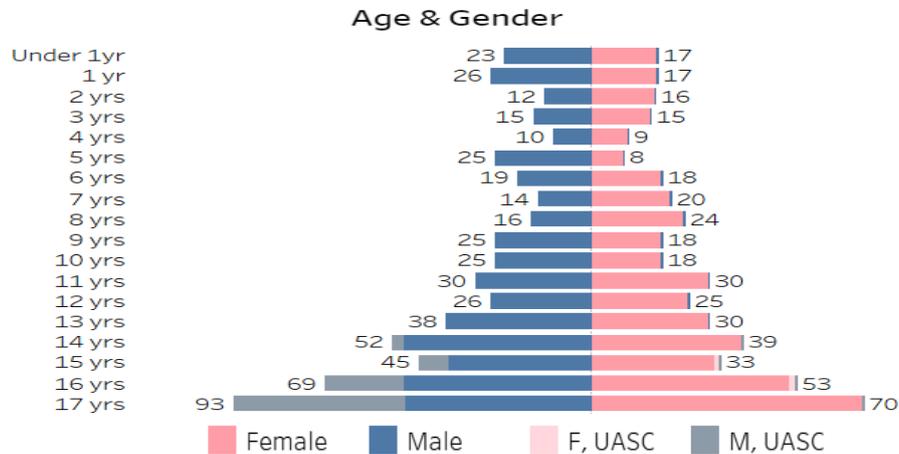


As stated, at the end of March 2021 999 children were looked after by Surrey. Within this cohort are 77 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), which is 8% of the children currently looked after by the local authority.

147 (15%) Looked After Children were under 5 (0.2% of Surrey u/5 population); 689 children aged 5-16 (69%) (0.4% compared to Surrey’s 5-16 child population); and 163 17-year-olds (16% of total looked after children cohort) and 757 young adults aged 18-24 (collectively 0.8% of Surrey’s 17-24 population) were in care and/or receiving support from Care Leavers Service.

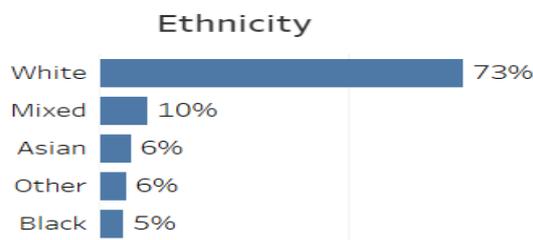
#### 4.2 The Age and Gender of Surrey's Looked After Children

The graph below shows the age and gender of Surrey's looked after children. Surrey's looked after children are 55% male and 45% female. There has been 2% increase in males being looked compared to last year.



The age profile of children in Surrey has remained similar to last year and broadly in line with national figures.

#### 4.3 Ethnicity of Surrey's Looked After Children



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

Surrey's looked after children are predominantly White British (73%), with relatively small numbers from mixed (10%), Asian (6%), other (6%) and Black (5%) backgrounds.

### 5. Independent Reviewing Service Performance

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

Independent Chairs have 5 working days to complete their outcomes or recommendations from the child's Looked After Review and 15 working days to complete the review record (letter) following the completion of the review process. Ensuring that outcomes and review records are consistently completed in timescales is an area we will continue to focus on in the coming year.

From October 2020 The Independent Reviewing Service has successfully piloted the writing of review records to children in letter format directly to the child and positive feedback has been received for this way of recording for a child their journey through care and their review meetings. This is now embedded across the service.

The majority of areas of focus identified within last year's report and our Service Plan has been embedded during this year and will continue to be monitored through the review of the Service Plan. Key areas include:

- Improvement in the quality of CLA plans to ensure they are SMART, and outcome focused and compliant with the new family safeguarding model – *all Independent Chairs attended learning sessions, focused on developing SMART child-centred outcome-based plans*
- Embedding the increased evidence of effective and consistent challenge from the Independent Chairs and Service through implementation of new alert recording system in LCS – *evidenced through increased number of alerts and alerts being resolved at lower level not requiring escalation to higher stages within the alert process the LCS bit?? has not yet been embedded.*
- Adequate and consistent staffing capacity within the Independent Chair workforce to deliver a high-quality service – *only 2.5FTE vacancy rate across the service and ongoing recruitment campaign to fill the vacancies. Some existing agency staff are also in process of or have already converted to permanent positions. We currently have a 72% permanent service.*
- Visibility on every child's file that the IRO has taken forward a care planning progress update – *performance data reviewed in supervision indicate increased compliance and improvement in timely completion of midway monitoring*
- Strengthening our liaison with the Children in Care council through links with User Voice and Participation Team (UVP) – *improved links between our Service Manager and Care Council and regular discussions with the Service Manager for UVP. IRS Service Manager has attended 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 - *there are now established Participation Champions within each team, linking with the User Voice & Participation Team Lead for each quadrant, to promote participation in reviews and offer/use of independent advocacy to all looked after children.*
- Commissioning an advocacy service from Coram Voice for our Looked After Children – *this has been achieved.*
- Continuing to learn from complaints to support improved practice – *continuous process of learning through feedback at team meetings and service meetings*
- Driving permanency forward for children looked after, new arrangements are in place for the service coordinators to attend Permanency Planning Meetings (PPM). – *this has been achieved and will continuously be monitored and reviewed through reviews, midways and Permanency Planning Meetings .*

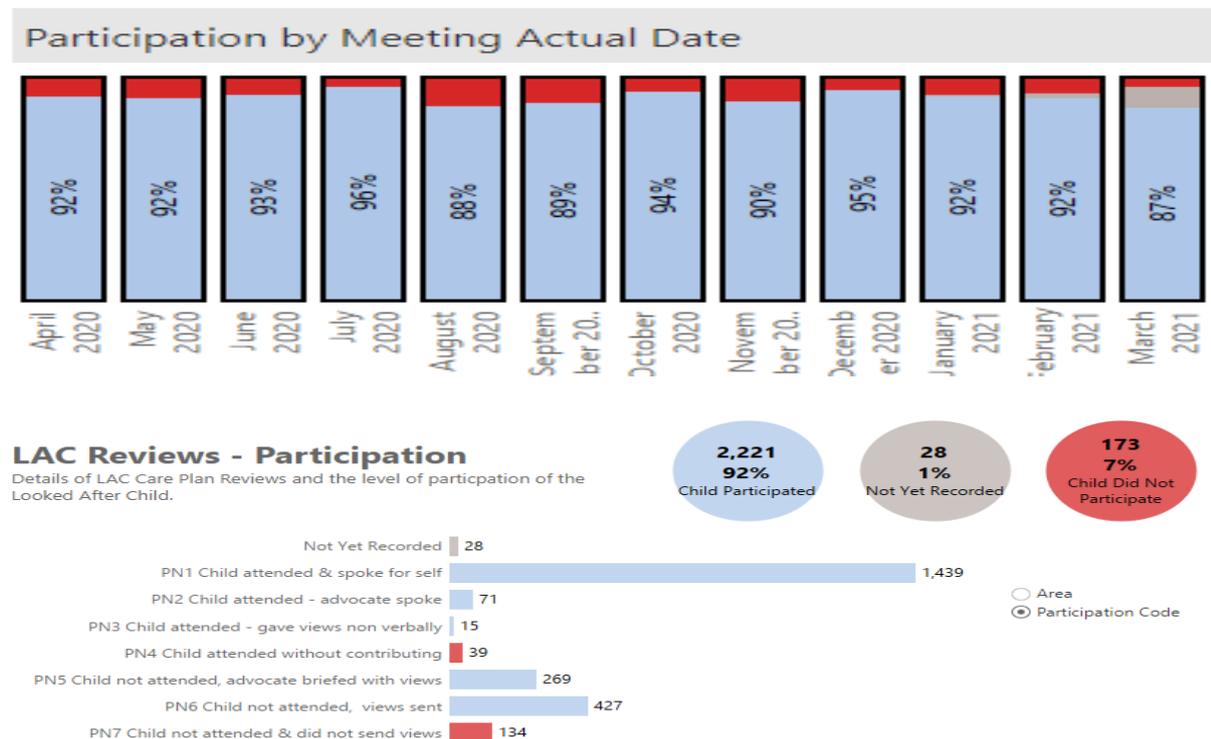
## 5.1 Timeliness of Review Meetings

During the reporting period the Independent Chairs undertook 2831 reviews. This is an increase of 117 review meetings compared to the previous year, where 2714 reviews were completed.

Reporting data indicates that 98% of all children’s review meetings were held in time. For the 22 children (22/999) where it indicated their reviews were overdue, this is due to a delay in their review meeting minutes being written up, but their reviews were held. Therefore, all children had their reviews held in time, which is an improvement from the previous reporting period, and this has been achieved despite a very challenging year due to the COVID pandemic. This is above the target of 95%.

The timeliness of reviews, timeliness of completion and quality of review records continue to be monitored through Service Coordinators’ quality assurance oversight, through practice observations, reviewing in supervision and analysis in the monthly Quality Assurance Report completed by each Service Coordinator.

## 5.2 Participation of Children in their Looked After Child Reviews



Overall, 92% of children participated in their review meetings. This is a 1% drop from the previous year. The children who did not participate in their review process or for whom it was not recorded were either missing at the time of their meetings, are severely disabled or chose not to participate. The data above does not include children under the age of 4 who had their looked after reviews during the reporting year.

Participation and observation of non-verbal children had been severely impacted during the reporting year due to the COVID pandemic. The majority of reviews were held virtually using technology such as MS Teams, WhatsApp, Face Time, so children could still be seen and spoken to, albeit being virtually.

Some children have thrived with the virtual way of communication, whilst others found it a challenge and chose not to participate using technology. When the 3<sup>rd</sup> lockdown ended and some restrictions were lifted, Surrey moved to reintroduce face to face looked after reviews where it was safe to do so, adhering to government guidance and requirements of social distancing; listening to the wishes of the children in how and what format they wished for their reviews to be undertaken. Due to some staff within the Service shielding they continued to hold virtual reviews.

To support increased participation, the Local Authority commissioned an independent advocacy service for children through Coram Voice. Service Coordinators continue to drive the use of this service in their dialogue with operational colleagues and Independent Chairs are asked to consider the use of an advocate with looked after children.

There are now established Participation Champions within each team, linking with the User Voice & Participation Team Lead for each quadrant, to promote participation in reviews and offer of independent advocacy to all looked after children.

### 5.3 Driving forward achieving permanence

One of the key functions of the Independent Chairs is to drive the plan for permanence for a child and to ensure the plan is meeting their needs. To support Independent Chairs to have oversight on the progression of a child's care plan between review meetings and achieving permanence in a timely manner, we have continued to embed our midway monitoring through Care Progress Update (CPU) meetings between the Independent Chair and Social Worker.

As part of our practice expectation Independent Chairs are expected to see the child face to face as part of the midway Care Progress Update, (due to the COVID pandemic this contact had to be virtually). The recording of the Care Progress Update meetings is now embedded in a form within the electronic system (LCS) and a reporting dashboard has been created to review compliance and to monitor impact. This was not in place during the previous reporting year, but to date there is been an improvement in compliance and at the end of March 2021, 69% of CPUs were completed or due to be held. This continues to be an area of improvement and focus on the Service.

Children's Services have strengthened practice around permanence for children looked after children in creating two Permanency Planning Managers roles, to support the tracking of children's permanency plans. The Permanency Policy has been amended, and clarity given, which now confirms the ratification by an Assistant Director for those children who are to be permanently matched with their IFA carers. Children placed in 52-week residential schools' permanence is now ratified by the Higher Needs Panel. Children placed with Surrey foster carers continue to be presented to Fostering Panel for matching of their permanent care arrangement.

In addition, Service Coordinators are now routinely attending Permanency Planning Meetings and Permanency Tracker Meetings to ensure we achieve permanence in a timely way for every child. Where there is concern of drift and delay, Independent Chairs and Service Coordinators will follow this up and challenge through the care planning alert process (dispute resolution process).

## 6. Dispute Resolution Process

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

- Informal = Social Worker/ Team Manager/ Service Manager
- 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.

### 6.1 Number and reasons for Care Planning Alerts

During the past year, the care planning alert process was triggered for 286 children. This is an increase on the previous year when it was raised for 261 children. Overall, the alerts raised for children were due to 470 different reasons. The majority of alerts were for a social work assessment report not being completed in timescale for the Looked After Child review (129), followed by the case drifting or a plan not being implemented in a timely way (101). An alert can be raised for multiple reasons.

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

During the coming year we aim to streamline and improve our alert process by developing reporting within our electronic recording system (LCS). This should strengthen the evaluation of the alerts recorded, to be able to have a clearer understanding of the reason for alerts and the impact the Service is having to seek to resolve concerns for children at the earliest opportunity.

Below is a breakdown of the reasons for alerts being raised for during the reporting period. There has been a steady increase in alerts being raised, in particular over the last 6 month, which has been and will remain an areas of focus for the service. All alerts were satisfactory concluded.

REASONS FOR ALERT DURING MARCH & APRIL'20		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
A	Report has not been completed	6	15	11	9	7	10	9	4	17	10	10	21	129
B	Child's wishes and feelings contradict the care plan	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	4	1	0	0	4	13
C	IRO disagrees with LA care plan	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	3	0	8
D	Plan not implemented in a timely way	3	10	3	2	5	6	4	10	12	12	17	17	101
E	Assessments not thorough enough	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	5	2	0	1	4	16
F	Delay in PLO/legal gateway meetings taking place	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	3	9
G	Incomplete LCS issues causing drift and delay	4	6	2	5	1	5	2	3	5	0	4	5	42
H	Concerns the child's placement is not meeting their needs	1	0	1	2	3	1	3	1	9	6	2	5	34
I	The child or young person has not been visited in timescales and/or not seen alone	3	1	0	1	0	2	2	1	2	0	3	0	15
J	Health assessments/PEPs not completed in time	0	5	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	8
K	There are safeguarding issues which are not being address or resolved	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	6	3	2	4	17
L	The child is in immediate danger	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	4
M	Lack of permanency planning	0	1	1	0	2	0	2	1	4	0	5	7	23
N	Human rights may be being breached.	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	3	0	1	10
O	Other	1	1	1	3	3	0	1	3	12	8	2	6	41
<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>470</b>

## 6.2 Stage of Alerts raised

130 Alerts were raised informally with Social Workers and Team Managers. 105 Alerts were triggered at Stage 1, with Team Manager. Due to increasing concern and lack of resolution at stage 1, 44 alerts progressed to Stage 2 with Service Managers, 6 alerts progressed to Stage 3 with Assistant Directors and one alert was raised at Stage 4 Director level.

Stage	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Informal	9	12	3	6	5	7	10	8	18	15	16	21	<b>130</b>
Stage 1	4	6	9	7	6	6	5	7	18	12	16	9	<b>105</b>
Stage 2	0	6	3	5	3	2	1	5	5	3	3	8	<b>44</b>
Stage 3	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	<b>6</b>
Stage 4	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
Stage 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
Stage 6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>286</b>

## 6.3 Key areas of challenge and focus raised by the Independent Reviewing Service

Alongside raising areas of good practice and challenge for individual children by their Independent Chair, over the past year the Service have also raised a few collective issues with Children's Services, which include:

- Concerns were raised with Gateways to Resources due to some semi-independent accommodation providers charging children a service fee. Following the challenge this was investigated and all children impacted by this were fully reimbursed for the monies that was wrongly taken from them.
- Permanency Policy was challenged due to lack of clarity and securing permanent matching for children living with independent fostering agency carers. The policy has been amended and good progress is being made in ratifying and agreeing long-term match for children where it has been assessed as their long-term care arrangements.
- Lack of clarity around process of communication between Gateways to Resources and Social Work teams, impacting on securing appropriate care arrangements for children were raised and a process has been put in place by the Gateways to Resources Service Manager to improve this matter.
- Concern regarding inaccuracies within the data recording of children having up to date care plans were raised with the performance team and this has now been resolved, with a vast improvement in children, demonstrating an improvement of 30%, up to 96% at the end of March 2021.
- An ongoing challenge, as is nationally also a concern, is the availability of suitable care arrangements such as local foster carers, to meet the demand and have sufficient supply to have a choice in matching children with potential long-term carers if the child is unable to return to live within their birth family. Surrey has increased the number of local carers, but the demand for placements continues to outweigh local capacity. There continues to be oversight and scrutiny of the quality and of unregulated placements. Where this is proposed for under 16s there has

been appropriate challenge and response, particularly as from September 2021 unregulated placements for children under 16 will be illegal

- Clarity was sought, following challenge by an Independent Chair and complaint by foster carers over the policy and application process for passports for looked after children. This has resulted in a new policy being developed, outlining a clear process and pathway in obtaining and storing of key documents for the application of passports.
- And lastly, an ongoing challenge around savings and finance entitlement for looked after children, to ensure greater equality has been resolved with the new Finance policy recently been approved by the Director for Corporate Parenting.

## 7. Summary and Next Steps

It has been a challenging year for the Independent Reviewing Service as it has been for everyone due to the COVID pandemic which forced all services to adjust with little planning to different ways of undertaking children's looked after reviews. The number of children required to be cared for by the local authority also increased; and due to some challenges that COVID and requirement of adhering to social distancing which some young people found hard to abide by and carers being in high risk categories, this brought about changes of care arrangements, which led to additional increase of meetings due to changes of placements.

Having said that, the Service responded extremely well to these challenges and achieved 100% timeliness for looked after reviews, which is above target. Children's participation dipped by 1%, although still above 90%.

Due to the COVID pandemic we have had to adjust quickly to different ways of working and engaging with our children. This has brought some challenges, but also good opportunities and new ways engaging. Many children have enjoyed having their meetings virtually and engaging with their Independent Chairs through social medium much more familiar to them, which for some children has increased their participation. However, for other children this way of working has brought more challenge and difficulty and where they had previous fully participated in their meetings, they have felt less able to do so through virtual meetings. For some children co-chairing their reviews has been more difficult virtually, but as we return to face to face meetings, they will again be encouraged to co-chair reviews when they have wished to do so.

The pandemic had raised a further challenge within the Independent Reviewing Service and for our engagement and observation of children with disabilities (CWD), in particular for children that are non-verbal and where virtual contact had impacted direct observations. For some children virtual meetings have been beneficial where children have additional needs and easily feel overwhelmed by a number of people in a room and therefore have benefitted from virtual meetings being held online. Their views have continued to be presented by their carer through visual displays and observing by camera, however, this has limited the ability for direct observations and to see children face to face.

A priority for our service will be to strengthen the link with CWD to ensure that intervention for children who are non-verbal are robust and that reports evidence the range of communications and methods of intervention that are used to promote the voice of the child.

An area of strength and learning that the Service will take from the pandemic is the ability to offer greater flexibility to children in how they want their meetings to be held, similar to how or what contact with their Independent Chairs between their review meetings and midway visits. Whether this will be face to face or contact through a Face Time call or WhatsApp, children are now more empowered and as Independent Chairs we have learnt to adjust to offer a range of ways to engage with our children.

We have embedded our new way of recording a child's looked after review record, in letter format. Feedback was sought from children and their families and network on this process and this will be repeated again during the next 6 months.

We have reintroduced 'Feedback Fortnight' three times a year, seeking feedback from children and their support network, to continuously improve our service delivery to looked after children.

There continues to be improved Independent Chair's footprint on children's files through timely completion of midway monitoring through care progress update meetings; QA completion after every review; monthly audits and increasing number of alerts being raised where required, which is evidenced on file.

The areas of concern brought to the local authority's attention were responded to and new policies and procedures are in place which should contribute to greater equality amongst our looked after children and better outcomes for our children. One of the biggest challenges remain availability of range of carers to be able to effectively and appropriate match children.

Key areas of focus for the Service for the coming year include:

- Continual working with the social work teams on the improvement in the quality of care plans for looked after children to ensure they are SMART child centred outcome-based plans.
- Ongoing improvement in the quality of recommendations/outcomes following a looked after review to ensure they are SMART child centred outcome-based recommendations to drive forward the care plan for the child.
- Embedding the increased evidence of effective and consistent challenge from the Independent Chairs and Service through implementation of new alert recording system in LCS
- Strengthening our liaison with the Children in Care Council through links with User Voice and Participation Team
- 'Feedback Fortnight' to be held to gain views of children and their support network to review service delivery
- 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.
- Continuing to strengthen the links between our service and Children with Disabilities Service to ensure that intervention for children are robust in particular for our children who are non-verbal and that their reports evidence the range of communications and methods of intervention that are used to promote their views, wishes and feelings and evidence their voice.

09/06/2021