



**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
CYNGOR BWRDEIS TREF SIROL RHONDDA CYNON TAF**

A virtual meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Board** will be held on

25 January 2021 at 10.00 am

Contact: Hannah Williams - Council Business Unit, Democratic Services (01443 424062)

LATE ITEM FOR DISCUSSION

8. INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER REPORT

To receive the report of the Group Director, Community and Children's Services providing the Corporate Parenting Board with information in relation to the activity of the IRO Service and the functions for Children Looked After.

(Pages 3 - 26)

Circulation:

County Borough Councillors:

Councillor C Leyshon (Chair)
Councillor G Hopkins (Vice-Chair)
Councillor J Rosser
Councillor J James
Councillor S. Rees-Owen
Councillor R Yeo
Councillor E Griffiths

Officers:

Paul Mee, Group Director Community & Children's Services
Christian Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Cara Miles, Childcare Solicitor
Ann-Marie Browning, Head of Children's Looked After Service
Annabel Lloyd, Service Director, Children's Services
Ceri Jones, Head of Access & Inclusion
Jayne Thomas, Complaints & QA Manager, Social Services

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RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

January 2021

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE MONITORING REPORT

**Authors: Emma Walters, Service Manager Safeguarding
Ceri Mann, Reviewing Team Manager, RCT Childrens Services
Tel: 01443 484520**

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of the report is to provide information about the discharge of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) functions for children looked after (CLA) for the period **1st April 2020 – 31st December 2020**. The Report is also presented to the Corporate Parenting Board.

Corporate Parenting Board Members are already familiar with the IRO role from prior reports and going forward, the context for that will be provided in an Appendix document included in the agenda.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board note the information contained within this report.

3. THE REVIEWING SERVICE

The Reviewing Service currently sits within the remit of the Head of Service for Safeguarding. It currently comprises 12 IRO full-time posts (up from 11 following the additional P-T hours agreed), 3 of which are filled by 6 part time staff, 2 Business Support staff who are responsible for taking notes in complex CLA Reviews, and a Team Manager who is line managed by the Service Manager for Safeguarding. The interim Service Manager Emma Walters has now been appointed on a permanent basis.

As a result of COVID all the service functions are currently being delivered remotely. Whilst necessary under the circumstances, this creates challenges for the service as best practice is that these meetings

should be held face-to-face and at the child's preferred venue (e.g. placement, school). Initially Reviews were conducted using telephone conference calling until TEAMS became available, and we are now in a position where we can invite children and their families to be a part of the video call.

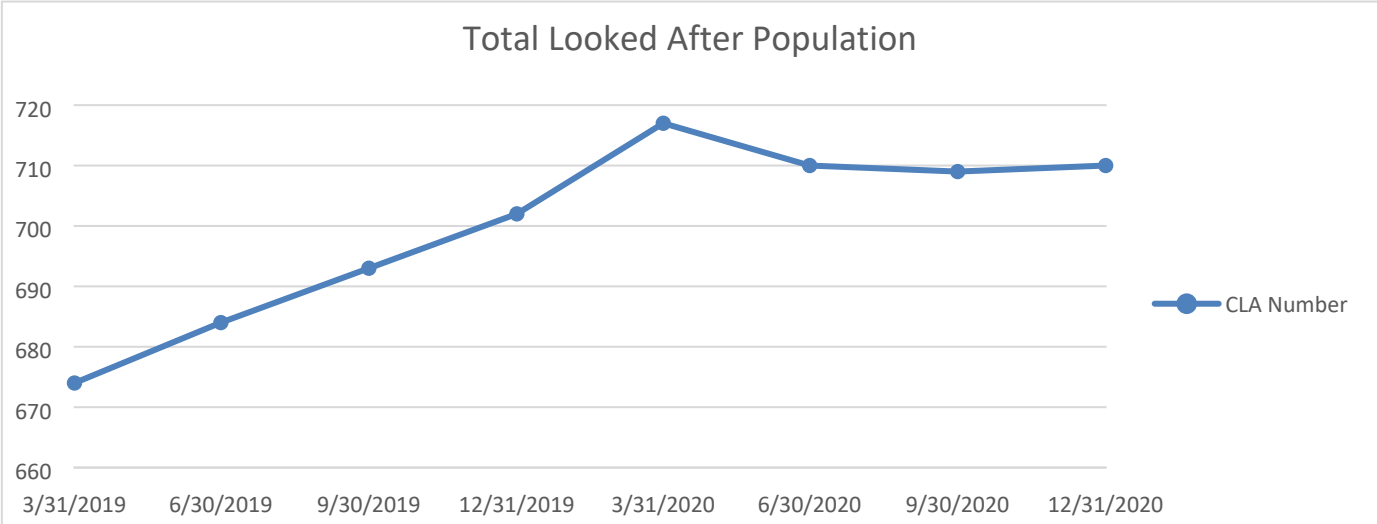
The rapid move to Agile working and WFH (with children being home schooled), whilst trying to chair complex and emotionally charged meetings via a digital platform (using technology that is not always reliable), clearly created particular pressures at the beginning of the lockdown for staff., The service has had to fundamentally alter the way it works, whilst being expected to operate to the same capacity; in a way that does not facilitate best practice with children and families. Staff have responded with impressive levels of patience and admirable commitment whilst adapting to the challenges they have faced and are working well under considerable pressure.

Once lockdown ends and the impact of the Council move towards remote working is clear, suitable accommodation for the delivery of hybrid meetings will have to be given priority by Corporate, as there has historically been a shortage of suitable venues for meetings within RCT.

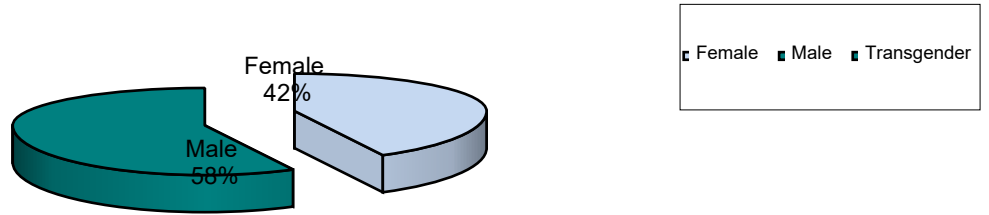
4. PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

Total Looked After Population (31st Dec 2020)

	31/03/2020	30/06/2020	30/09/2020	31/12/2020
CLA Number	717	710	709	710



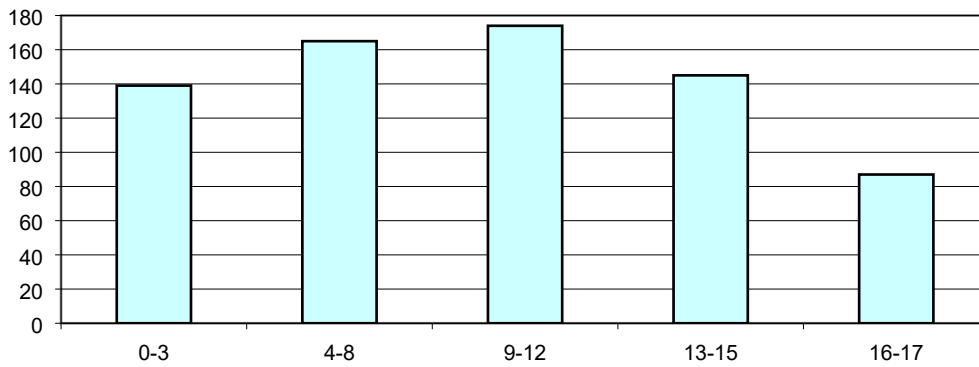
CLA as at 31.12.20 by Gender



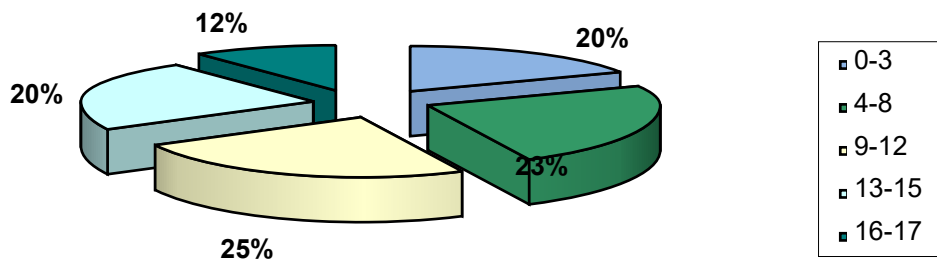
	CLA as at 30.09.19 by Gender	CLA as at 31.12.19 by Gender	CLA as at 31.03.20 by Gender	CLA as at 30.06.20 by Gender	CLA as at 30.09.20 by Gender	CLA as at 31.12.20 by Gender
Female	294	298	303	297	302	301
Male	399	404	414	413	407	409
Transgender	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	693	702	717	710	709	710

Looked After Population by Age Group

CLA as at 31.12.20 by Age

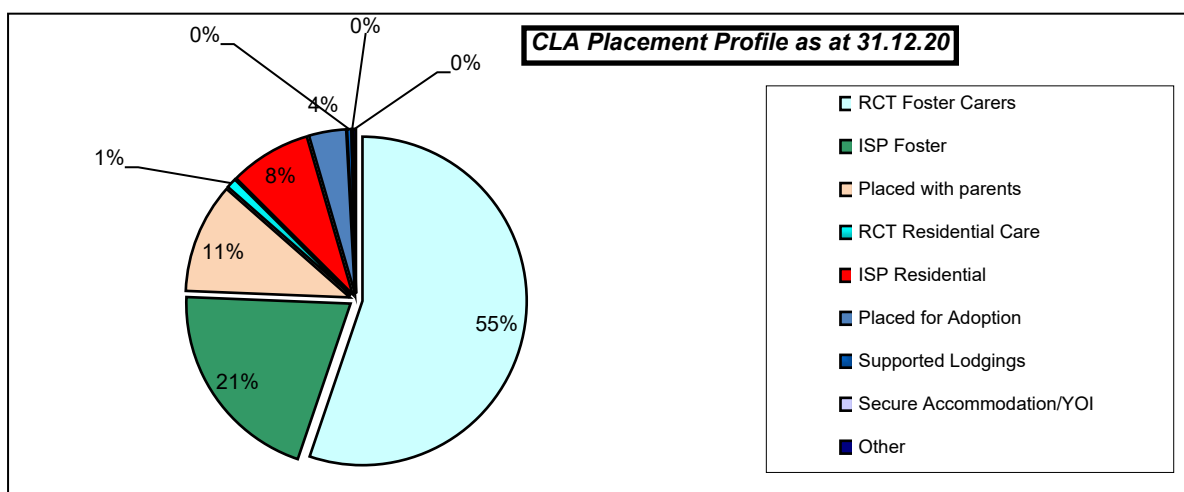


CLA as at 31.12.20 by Age

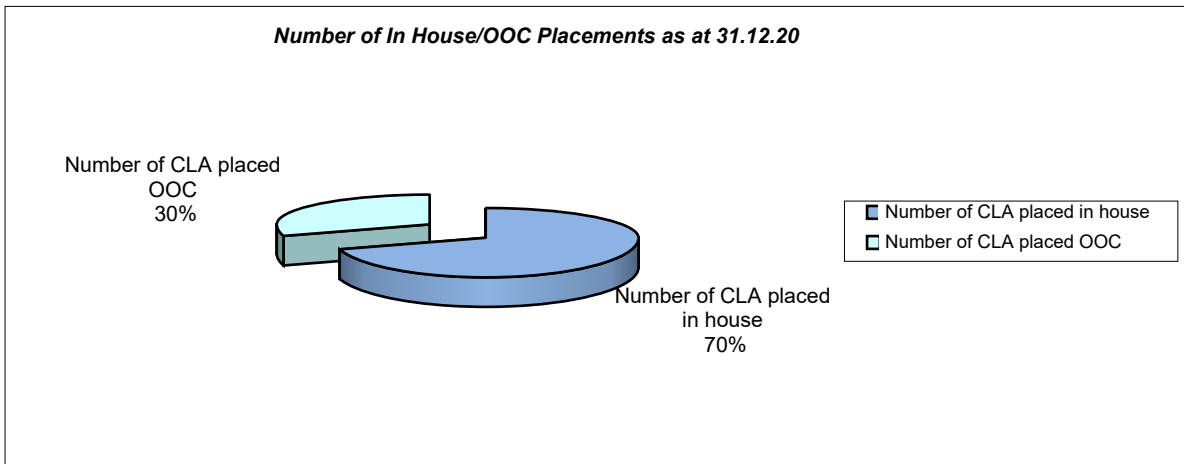


	0-3	4-8	9-12	13-15	16-17	Total
CLA as at 31.03.19 by Age	142	163	153	118	98	674
CLA as at 30.06.19 by Age	136	166	165	121	96	684
CLA as at 30.09.19 by Age	136	165	170	128	94	693
CLA as at 31.12.19 by Age	134	161	172	134	101	702
CLA as at 31.03.20 by Age	133	174	170	136	104	717
CLA as at 30.06.20 by Age	134	172	162	137	105	710
CLA as at 30.09.20 by Age	132	175	167	137	98	709
CLA as at 31.12.20 by Age	139	165	174	145	87	710

Placement Details – including numbers in foster care, residential placements, placements within and external to RCT, those provided by Independent Agencies etc.

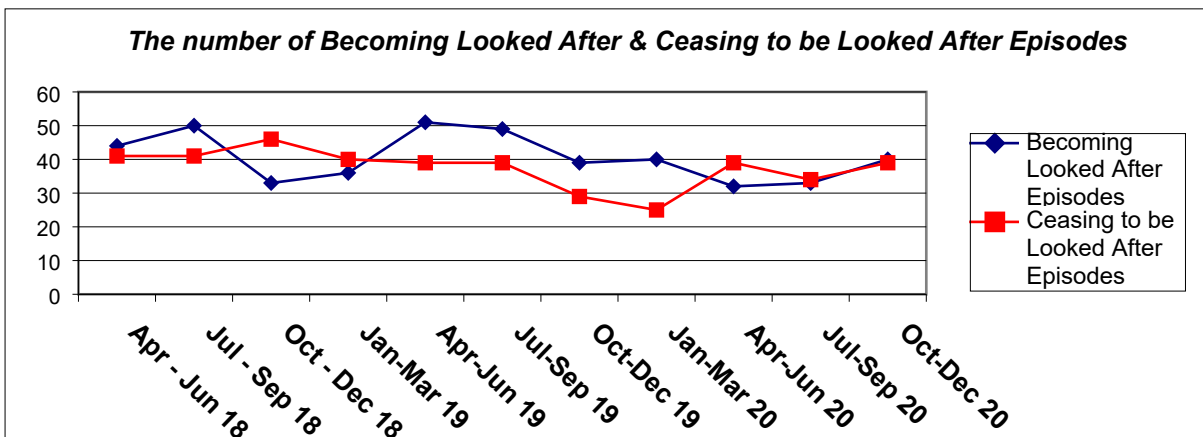


	Mar-19	Jun-19	Sep-19	Dec-19	Mar-20	Jun-20	Sep-20	Dec-20
RCT Foster Carers	373	382	391	383	394	399	393	392
ISP Foster	160	157	154	158	161	152	152	145
Placed with parents	60	71	76	77	70	67	65	77
RCT Residential Care	7	8	9	11	11	11	10	7
ISP Residential	38	37	39	45	52	52	55	57
Placed for Adoption	24	18	16	21	22	25	29	26
Supported Lodgings	10	7	7	6	6	3	3	3
Secure Accommodation/YOI	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	1
Other	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2
Total	674	684	693	702	717	710	709	710



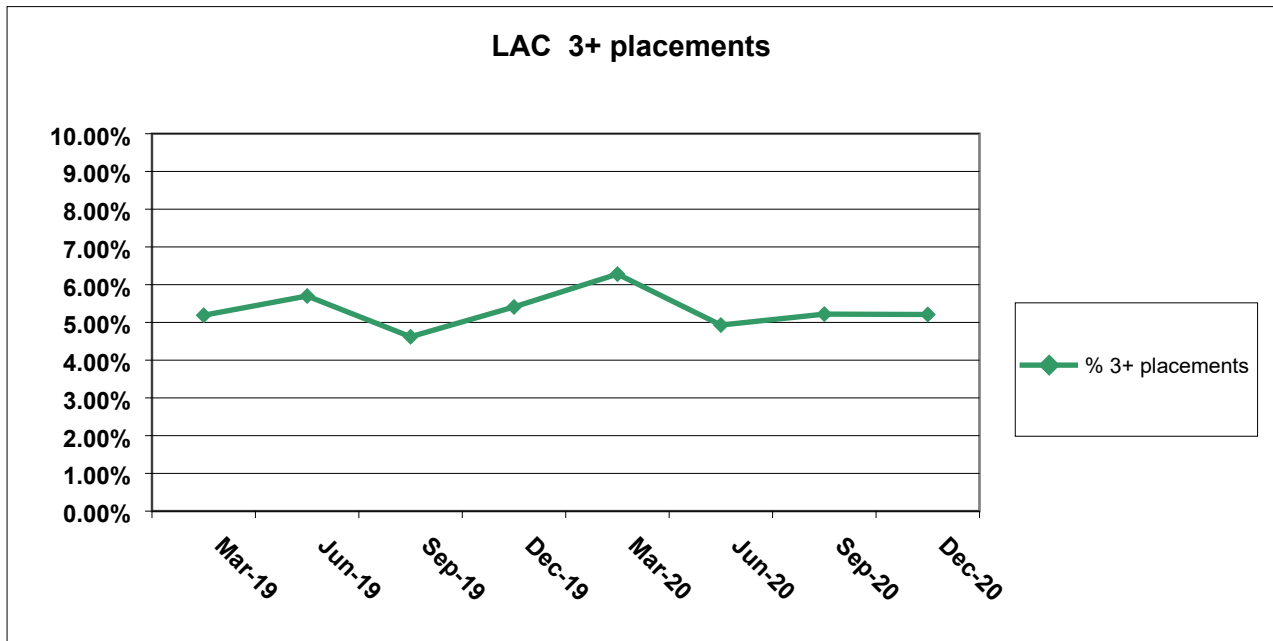
	Mar-19	Jun-19	Sep-19	Dec-19	Mar-20	Jun-20	Sep-20	Dec-20
Number of CLA placed in house	489	503	516	512	503	514	495	499
Number of CLA placed OOC	185	181	177	190	214	196	214	211
Total CLA	674	684	693	702	717	710	709	710
% OOC	27.4%	26.5%	25.5%	27.1%	29.8%	27.6%	30.2%	29.7%

Admissions and Discharge Information



	Apr - Jun 18	Jul - Sep 18	Oct - Dec 18	Jan-Mar 19	Apr-Jun 19	Jul-Sep 19	Oct-Dec 19	Jan-Mar 20	Apr-Jun 20	Jul-Sep 20	Oct-Dec 20
Becoming Looked After Episodes	44	50	33	36	51	49	39	40	32	33	40
Ceasing to be Looked After Episodes	41	41	46	40	39	39	29	25	39	34	39

Placement Stability

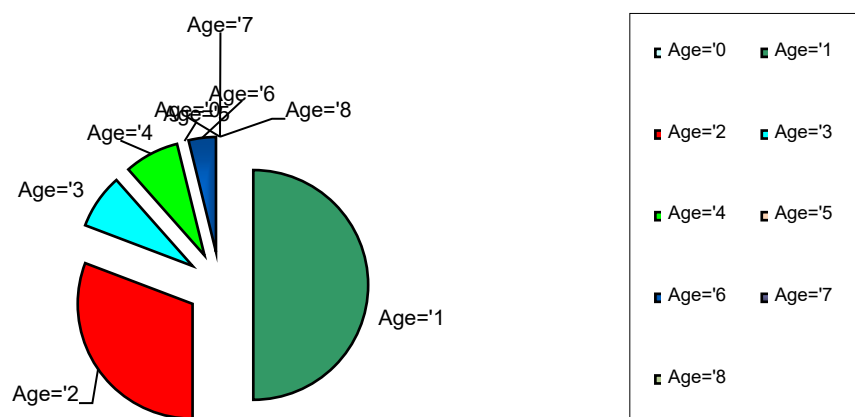


	Mar-19	Jun-19	Sep-19	Dec-19	Mar-20	Jun-20	Sep-20	Dec-20
% 3+ placements	5.19%	5.70%	4.62%	5.41%	6.28%	4.93%	5.22%	5.21%

Adoption Information

Total numbers of children placed for adoption or adopted, including age and gender breakdown

Adoption Placements as at 31.12.20 by Age



Adoption Placements as at 31.12.20 by Age	Total
Age=0	0
Age=1	13
Age=2	8
Age=3	2
Age=4	2
Age=5	0
Age=6	1
Age=7	0
Age=8	0
Total	26

Adoption Placements as at 31.12.20 by Gender	Total
Female	10
Male	16
Total	26

Adoption Information	Total
Number of children placed for adoption as at 31.12.20	26
Number of children placed for adoption between 01.01.20 - 31.12.20	21
Number of Children adopted between 01.01.20 - 31.12.20	16

5. REVIEW ACTIVITY 1st April 2020 – 31st December 2020

CLA Numbers:

Overall, we are seeing a reduction in admission figures, and the number of CLA admissions during the period January 2020 to December 2020 decreased by 30 when compared to the same period in 2019, a 17% decrease in admissions.

During this reporting period (covering Q 2, 3 and 4) the total number of children looked after fluctuated between 700 and 716 - a reduction in overall numbers on the previous reporting period (717 at its highest). Given the impact of lockdown on families and the challenges this has presented the LA in terms of finding placements, moving children between and out of placements safely and in line with WG procedures, the reduction and stability of number is not surprising.

CLA By Age:

As of the end of 31/12/20, 34% of admissions were for children aged under 1 year old. The numbers have increased by 8 when compared to the same period in 2019 and the trend shows that this age group continues to have the highest number of admissions. 32 out of the 49 babies (under 1) becoming looked after were boys.

The number of children aged 1-4 increased during 2020 with 31 children becoming looked after compared to 28 in 2019.

The number of children being brought into care aged 16+ had decreased by 4 when compared to the same period in 2019 - from 11 to 7 - which makes up 5% of the overall figure in 2020.

Based on current CLA numbers the highest number are in the 10-15 age group. This age group is consistently the highest percentage.

Placement Details:

At of the end of 31/12/20 most children are placed with Relative Carers (33%). This figure includes approved and non- approved kinship carers.

In House Foster Care placements continue to be higher than Independent Sector Foster Care.

The number of Mother and Baby placements has increased from 1 to 6 over the last 12 months.

The number of children placed with parents has increased by 1 over the last 12 months.

70% of looked after children were residing within RCT on the 31/12/2020. 211 children were in placements outside RCT on 31/12/2020 and of these 11 were residing outside Wales.

Placement Stability:

This is a Welsh Government Performance Indicator that we report on quarterly and the target for 2019/20 was 6%. Performance has improved since year end 19/20 and we achieved target at the end of Quarter 3 with 5.4%.

Children move placement for a variety of different reasons & some of the 3rd placements will relate to children's moves to a permanent long-term placement. Performance can also be affected by the continued high number of children looked after which can put pressure on placement availability.

Adoption:

14 children have had a Placement Order granted between January 2020 to December 2020. Of these children, 7 have been placed with prospective adopters and the remaining 7 children are residing in foster care placements.

In comparison to the previous year there has been a 46% decrease in the number of Placement Orders granted.

A total of 21 adoption placements were started between January 2020 to December 2020 which is a 22% decrease compared to the previous year.

16 Adoption Orders have been granted over the last 12 months which is 50% less than compared to the previous year.

Admissions and Discharges:

138 children ceased being looked after between January 2020 and December 2020. This is a 7% decrease in numbers compared to the same period January 2019 to December 2019 where 151 children ceased being looked after.

In relation to where the children reside upon leaving care, 49% of children returned home Family/Extended Family during the period which is the highest percentage.

16 children (12%) had Adoption Orders granted so now reside with their adoptive families.

35 children (25%) remained with foster carers either as a 'When I'm Ready' arrangement upon turning 18 or subject to a Special Guardianship Order.

Independent living accounted for 12% and these are mainly young people aged 16+.

In relation to the ages of children when they cease being looked after, more children left care aged 18 accounting for 31% of the total number.

The second highest age group were aged 1 - 4 accounting for 20% out of the total. Out of the 28 children in this age group 50% were adopted and 39% returned home to parents.

Young people aged 16+ are the highest group to remain with foster carers under supported lodgings or When I'm Ready arrangements. The 11 children aged 0-15 remained with foster carers as part of a Special Guardianship Order.

There are currently 285 care leavers open to the 16+ teams aged between 18-25. 48% of these young people reside in Independent Living placements which is the highest percentage. 46% of these young people in Independent Living placements are aged 18-21.

18% of Care Leavers reside with Family or Relatives and 7% remained with their Foster Carers as part of a 'When I'm Ready' arrangement. There have been 94 Young Persons placed in When I'm Ready placements since the scheme started in 2015. 50% (47) of these YP remained with their Former Independent Foster Carers, 30% (28) with RCT Foster Carers and 20% (19) with Relative Carers. Five former WIR placements still return to their carers from University during holiday breaks and some have returned during the lockdown periods due to Covid-19.

5 YP aged 18-21 are not engaging with 16+ and their whereabouts are currently unknown.

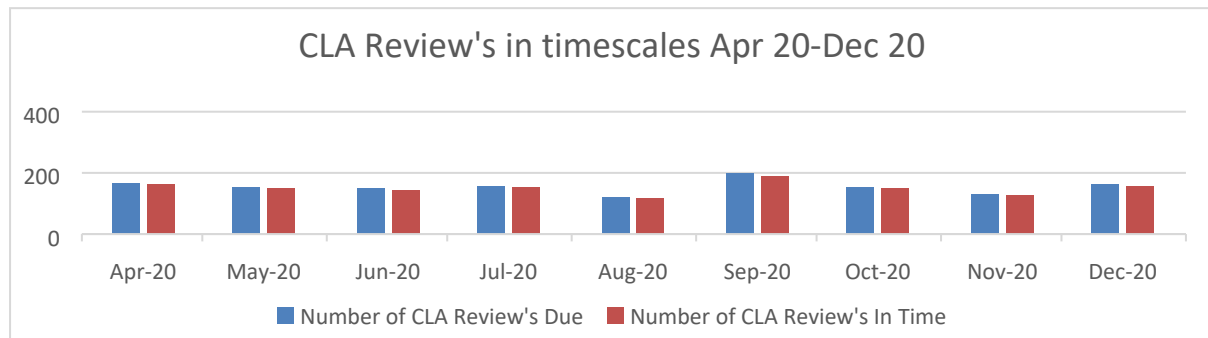
Of the 285 care leavers aged 18-25, 16 have a category of homeless recorded. Some of the reasons for homelessness can relate to care leavers leaving home due to relationship breakdowns that result in them moving frequently between

friends and family. Being unable to remain in housing due to affordability problems, mental health issues or leaving prison with no home to go to.

CLA Reviews

CLA Review's in Time January 1st, 2020 to March 31st December 2020

1,382 CLA review meetings were due in this 9-month period and our CLA Review performance was at 97% at the end of December 2020.



	Apr20	May20	Jun20	Jul20	Aug20	Sep20	Oct20	Nov20	Dec20	Total
Number of CLA Review's Due	167	152	149	155	119	198	151	130	161	1382
Number of CLA Review's in Time	163	149	144	151	117	187	149	125	156	1341
% In Time	98%	98%	97%	97%	98%	94%	99%	96%	97%	97%

In addition, IROs chaired **11** combined CLA Reviews and Review Conferences to remove the names of children looked after under Care Orders from the Child Protection Register, and **12** IFSS (Integrated Family Support Service) Reviews.

6. REASONS FOR CANCELLATION

Only 41 Reviews were not held in time between April 2020 to December 2020, which equates to just 2.96%, a positive decrease compared to the last reporting period, and a significant achievement considering the circumstances facing the service. Every effort is made to ensure that cancelled reviews are reconvened within time, and when this isn't possible permission to go out of time should be sought from a Service Manager or Head of Service. This is reflected in the significantly lower number of reviews that have gone out of time to those that have been rearranged within time.

The reasons for cancellations / delays vary, but a number are undoubtedly due to the impact of Covid on the availability of family, social workers, IRO's and other professionals - in particular where services and service provision has had to adapt throughout the pandemic. Further examples of CLA reviews being cancelled include to allow newly allocated workers opportunity to meet with the children and their families to ensure that the review is affective, or to

combine the CLA review with a Review Child Protection Conferences, thereby reducing the number of meetings for families and professionals.

Quarter Comparators (over this reporting period and with Q4)

January - March 2020

424 Reviews held within timescale and 23 outside Total 447 = **94.85 %**

April - June 2020

456 Reviews held within timescale and 12 outside Total 468 = **97.44 %**

July - September 2020

455 Reviews held within timescale and 17 outside Total 472 = **96.4%**

October – December 2020

430 Reviews held within timescale and 12 outside Total 442 = **97.29%**

7. CURRENT ISSUES FOR THE REVIEWING SERVICE

We are currently carrying some management level absences and vacancies, and to date Randstad have been unable to provide a suitable replacement and discussions are taking place with an external Consultant to explore them providing some additional capacity. After carrying two IRO vacancies through 2019 and into early 2020, we appointed two new IRO's in February 2020. One was due to commence in April 2020, but because of the pandemic, her start date was delayed until August 2020 so that she could continue to support Intensive Intervention. She is now in post and settling well. The other appointee withdrew, and we continued to carry that absence until very recently, when the new worker started in post.

During this reporting period we have had agreement to convert a part-time member of staff to a full-time post, in recognition of the increased demands on the service and the lack of investment for a significant period. We have identified a suitable internal member of staff, who should take up the post in March 2021.

We continue to experience ongoing sickness absence within the service, including amongst business support colleagues, which has resulted in the remaining staff having to take on more work, which has clearly had an impact on the completion of paperwork within timescales. Where necessary to cover work and meet statutory timescales, we have offered additional hours to existing P-T staff.

The Service Manager has introduced processes to ensure that monitoring of the progress of the Care and Support Plan between Review meetings is happening more consistently and recorded. To do this the IROs require adequate time to perform this function as it can often entail things needing to be chased up with the child's social

worker and the child to be spoken to if there are any outstanding concerns; something which is challenging under the current circumstances.

Despite high CLA numbers, the recent IRO appointments have ensured that every Looked After Child is allocated a named IRO from within the service. The IRO's are carrying caseloads higher than ideal because of the staffing gaps that have existed (England has set targets for IRO caseloads that we exceed) and the new appointments will hopefully assist in seeing them reduce. During this reporting period the service has experienced an increase in late requests for meeting changes, attributable in part to the impact the pandemic is having on multi-agency capacity and operational delivery; all of which creates additional bureaucratic demands on the service as meetings have to be rescheduled.

It was reported previously to Corporate Parenting Board that we were seeing cases where Placement with Parent review meetings are having to be convened at very short notice because of decisions being made in Court that children should return home on Care Orders, and whilst this continues to be the case, we are seeing fewer in number.

8. RESOLUTIONS RAISED BY IRO'S APRIL 2020 - DECEMBER 2020

In total **11** resolutions were raised in this reporting period, less than we have previously reported. It should be noted that this is a very low percentage in terms of the total number of Care and Support plans that are reviewed by the IROs. Whilst this would indicate that the majority of children are having their needs met it should be noted that at the beginning of the pandemic IRO's were asked to be mindful of the demands and challenges experienced by frontline social workers as they adjusted to the agile working practices and to resolve issues informally wherever possible.

Theme: Recommendations Not Being Acted On

The role of the IRO carries with it personal responsibility for carrying out his or her functions. In a case in 2012, *A & S v Lancashire CC* [2012] EWHC 1689 (Fam) it was clarified that the IRO may be held personally responsible for:

- a) Identifying if a child or young person's human rights are being infringed;
- b) Ensuring that the local authority acts upon the recommendations of the CLA review;
- c) Referring to CAFCASS if the child/young person's human rights are infringed or significant recommendations of the review are not acted upon.

The 'decisions' made during a review are, in fact, 'recommendations' to the local authority, but there is an expectation that they will be acted on unless the Team Manager chooses not to and informs the IRO of this decision – thereby allowing the IRO to challenge the decision within the resolution process if they feel it is necessary to do so.

Resolution:

There had been discussion between the social worker and IRO as to whether the plan for a young person to remain in a residential school was still in their best interests and for that reason the decision was made in the CLA review in January 2020 for a comprehensive assessment to be undertaken to ensure that the plan continued to be in the child's best interests. A comprehensive assessment is, as the

name suggests a significant piece of work that takes into account all aspects of a child's life and their wishes and feelings when assessing their needs, and will also rely on the views of partner agencies as well as family members.

Unfortunately the Covid pandemic meant that assessment wasn't undertaken in person as it would ordinarily have been, and as a result the report had not been shared or discussed with the young person (the subject). The IRO also drew attention to the delay in beginning the assessment before the Covid outbreak.

Outcome:

The social worker and team manager acknowledged that there had been a delay in starting the assessment and explained that court proceedings in relation to other cases on their caseload had contributed to the delay, and that this was compounded by the pandemic.

The IRO received reassurances that as soon as government guidelines were eased the social worker would prioritise a visit to the child in placement to discuss the report and its recommendations. The IRO postponed a planned CLA review to ensure that there was an opportunity for this to happen and that the child and her parents were able to fully participate and could challenge or offer an informed view on the assessment if necessary.

Theme: Life Journey Work

Life journey work is a sensitive and emotive piece of work that will explain to a child why they became looked after, who looked after them, as well as why certain key decisions were made on their behalf that will have had a significant impact on the rest of their lives. It is a document that they will carry with them throughout their childhood and into adulthood. It will include not only photographs of the significant people in their lives but also important memories. It will usually have been completed before the Adoption Order is granted because it is one of the National Adoption Indicators. There is an expectation that by the second adoption review meeting, a child's later life letter and life journey work will have been completed.

Resolution:

Having asked in the second adoption review of a child whether the later life letter and life journey work had been completed the IRO was told that there had been a delay because the life journey work had been allocated to a Life Journey Worker, and that the later life letter was being amended because it was confusing and unclear.

Outcome:

The IRO negotiated realistic timescales with both the responsible Team Manager and the adoption support worker for the completion of both documents and invited the life journey worker to contact him directly if any issues arose that prevented the work being completed as agreed.

The IRO received confirmation that the work had been completed within the month

Theme: Delay in complying with Court Directions

It is the role of the IRO to ensure that Court directions in relation to the care of a child are undertaken at the end of proceedings, and to raise issue where there is an unacceptable delay in doing so.

Resolution:

Unusually in this specific example, whilst RCT had been granted a Care Order in respect of a sibling group of children, the court placed the responsibility for funding their play therapy with a different LA.

RCT Children's Services had identified play therapists able to meet the identified needs of the children as was required, but the responsible LA were unhappy with the prices quoted and refused to meet the full amount. The IRO raised a resolution in relation to significant delay in the children receiving the play therapy.

Outcome:

Out of concern for the impact the delay was likely to have upon the children agreement was reached for the play therapy to begin, and for RCT to meet any shortfall whilst negotiation continued with the responsible LA.

9. DEVELOPMENT WORK**Conference Calling:**

Since the start of the pandemic, the Service has become completely reliant upon the use of technology. Initially IRO's were having to chair both CLA reviews and Child Protection Conferences using mobile phone conferences calling facilities. Unfortunately, this limited the number of participants to five and was not child friendly. There was no capacity to enable a minute taker to attend and so the workload for IRO's substantially increased.

More recently our Business Support have acquired Microsoft Teams Meetings Licences which allow them to set up video conferencing for children, families and professionals. Whilst the uptake from parents involved in the child protection planning process has been encouraging, there is a sense amongst the team that this isn't the case with our looked after children. Some of the feedback given to IRO's is that children don't want to participate in video-conferences or they don't want to be seen / see themselves on a screen.

Consultation Documents:

Historically social workers have encouraged children and young people to complete a review consultation document during their visits to placements, but in an attempt to ensure that the child's voice is heard (in light of children's poorer participation) links to the online consultation document are being attached to all invitations whether to the child, family or professionals. Unfortunately, whilst there have been some responses, once again the numbers are relatively low with approximately 30 received for the whole of November and December 2020.

As a result of the ongoing work with WiCID to host the 2 Sides content, the Service been in contact with RCT's Consultation Team who are in the process of reviewing the consultation questions and acquiring a "photo symbols licence" so that the document can be made far more visually appealing and child friendly. A meeting is planned to discuss the progress of this work at the end of January 2021.

IRO's continue in their efforts to speak to children in advance of their Review meeting to both ascertain the issues that are pressing and important to them, and to encourage their participation in the reviews themselves.

The Reviewing Team are also beginning to undertake mid-point reviews as a means

not only of promoting contact with the child / young person in between review meetings, but as a means of monitoring a case on a continuing basis so as to ensure that the care and support plan remains in the child/young person best interests. Although there is more work to be done, IRO's are making efforts not only to speak to the child, but also parents, carers and social workers to ascertain whether decisions have been actioned and how they perceive the plan to be progressing.

Voices from Care:

The Service approached Voices from Care a short time after video conferencing had been introduced to ask whether they had undertaken any work or knew of any research with regards to promoting children's participation in meetings using video technology and the various platforms. It was somewhat reassuring to discover that Voices from Care have also experienced difficulties engaging young people in this way although they weren't in a position to offer any advice.

VFC continue to forward information regarding ongoing projects and online events to the Reviewing Team Manager so that they can be distributed to Children's Services staff, The Reviewing Team Manager has also introduced VFC to the new Fostering Team Manager with a view to enabling information to be shared directly with children and carers.

Hybrid Meeting:

It has been the Service's goal throughout the pandemic to work towards hybrid meetings, and the issues already raised re children's participation highlights the need to do so as soon as it is practical. The service has used the term hybrid meeting to describe a meeting where family, social worker and IRO can socially distance in one room whilst professionals can continue to participate using video conferencing. This will be dependent upon us being able to secure access to appropriate office accommodation. It should be noted however that depending what office space is available Case Conferences are likely to be the priority for hybrid meetings given the levels of stress and anxiety families experience in them.

2Sides Website:

The Reviewing Team Manager has met with Abbie Davies (WiCID Editor) and her manager Kelly Cobb. Both recognised the potential for WiCID to reach our audience and provide information that is of use to them regardless of their looked after status.

Agreed Focus:

- Revisiting the content and making it YP friendly. WiCID is finding that it is better to have snippets of information and then links to documents or videos such as You Tube, or similar videos relevant to the topic.
- The Reviewing Team Manager has sourced website links (Children's Commissioners Rights of the Child video, Children in Wales guidance documents etc) and WiCID has approached the Youth Forum to involve them. The Forums are beginning to reform having been quiet because of Covid .
- Kelly Cobb is also asking the Youth Engagement and Progression Officers to engage with some of the looked after children in schools and involve them in the development of the content
- It is encouraging that once this work has been completed, WiCID will be able to monitor the amount of traffic visiting the 2Sides Content

The Orb:

In terms of work to compliment or enhance the work that had already taken place with 2Sides, there has been no work undertaken on the Orb since March 2020 and with regard to the App being built for us by a care experienced software developer, this work is progressing. There was a consultation with young people and practitioners during Nov / Dec 2020 (facilitated by DCT).

MUSE:

RCT has commissioned a scoping exercise with MUSE Care to explore the development of a mobile phone app for looked after children. This exercise began in November and has so far involved interviews with a mixed cohort including children, social workers, fostering social workers and residential workers as well as IRO's. It is understood that lead person is due to present his feedback in the new year.

CAFCASS:

In the past the Reviewing Team has sought to develop a close, positive working relationship with the Children's Family Court Advisors, with the intention of improving information sharing during and at the end of care proceedings.

Unfortunately, management restructuring changes within CAFCASS meant that these plans stalled until recently.

Adoption Review Documentation:

In light of the recommendations of a Child Practice Review, Children's Services and the Reviewing Team were part of a task and finish group to produce an adoption review document that will be used by RCT, Merthyr, Cardiff and The Vale as well as VVC. This work was piloted in early 2020 with the expectation that it would be reviewed in May 2020. Unfortunately, the pandemic has meant that the pilot has not yet been reviewed as planned and so we have continued to use the new documentation which we consider to be an improvement.

Developing a new CLA Review document:

It was reported previously that the Reviewing Team had drafted a 3 part CLA review document which comprised the social worker's report, IRO's summary of the review discussion, and the Team Manager's response to the recommendations. The intention prior to the pandemic was for this to be piloted, but this has not been possible because of the impact the pandemic has had on practice. The decision has been made to delay the pilot whilst frontline teams manage the challenges of agile working during the pandemic.

Life Journey Work:

Following on from the Bright Spots Survey that was commissioned by the LA in 2018 the reviewing service contributed to development of life journey work for all children who become looked after. The pilot was successful and some of the life journey work that has been shared with IRO's has been of such a high quality. There are still issues to resolve, which includes how these large data files can be sent / shared given that they are too big to email, and how going forward, these "flipbooks" can be stored in shared spaces that can be accessed by key individuals. It is envisaged that the Office 365 might overcome issues such as these, but this is being explored further.

10. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

This is an information report therefore no Equality and Diversity Assessment is required.

11. CONSULTATION

This is an information report therefore no consultation is required.

12. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

None

13. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

This is covered in the Appendix document.

14. LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN / OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/ FUTURE GENERATIONS – SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The statutory responsibilities and good practice standards of the Reviewing Service compliment the Council's Corporate Priorities to promote independence and positive lives for everyone by ensuring:

- Rhondda Cynon Taf children and young people will receive a great start in life.
- Where children and young people are unable to live to live with their own parents, we put in place the care arrangements, including specialist accommodation, which will keep them safe and well. We will ensure that we listen to the voices of these children and young people by involving them in monitoring the action plan to address a child's journey through care from admission to exit.

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INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO) RELEVANT LEGISLATION AND GUIDANCE

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (referred to as the SSWB Act) and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Wales) Regulations 2015 and 2016 (referred to as the CPPCR Regulations) replace previous legislation and guidance pertaining to the role and functions of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).

RCT staff guidance has been issued in respect of the SSWB Act Code of Practice part 6; the Role and Responsibilities of the IRO, and the IRO Resolution Protocol.

RCT Guidance has been prepared in response to the Practice Standards and Good Practice Guide issued by Welsh Government and AFA Cymru: Reviewing and Monitoring of a Child or Young Person's Part 6 Care and Support Plan. This is currently under review and will be taken to the policy review board for consideration imminently before disseminating to all staff.

The CPPCR Regulations specify:

- The general duty of the responsible local authority to review all Looked After children's cases.
- The responsible authority must not make any significant change to a child's care and support plan unless the proposed change has first been considered at a review of the child's case, unless this is not reasonably practicable.
- The circumstances in which the local authority must consult the IRO.
- When the IRO must consult with the child.
- The actions that the IRO must take if the local authority is failing to comply with the CPPCR Regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child in any material way. In RCT, this is addressed through the Resolutions process, which may include making a referral to CAFCASS in accordance with section 100(3) of the SSWB Act.

The SSWB Act Part 6 Code of Practice sets out the requirements of the IRO and the responsible authority in more detail. The key functions of the IRO are to:

- Monitor the local authority's performance in relation to the child's case.
- Review the child's Part 6 Care and Support Plan (CASP) in line with the Regulations.
- Ensure that the child's wishes and feelings are taken into consideration.
- Perform any other function prescribed in the Regulations.

Legislation and good practice guidance require an IRO to chair reviews of children who are: -

- Looked After subject to an Interim Care Order or a Care Order under Section 38/31 of the Children Act 1989.
- This includes children who are placed with a parent or a kinship carer as well as children placed in foster care, residential care and secure establishments.
- Accommodated with the agreement of parents (S76 SSWB Act) - this includes a series of short-term breaks.
- In an Adoptive Placement prior to an Adoption Order being granted.
- Detailed in a Young Offender Institutions and subject to a Care Order or remanded to local authority accommodation or youth detention accommodation.
- 18 years and under and have a Pathway Plan.
- All Integrated Family Support Service (IFSS) plans are also reviewed by an IRO.

The most recent practice standards and guidance focus on strengthening the monitoring of care planning between CLA Review meetings, ensuring that the voice of the child is heard throughout the reviewing process, and that there is a transparent and robust process in place for addressing significant concerns raised by the IRO regarding a child/young person's care and support plan.

THE REVIEWING SERVICE

The Reviewing Service currently sits within the remit of the Head of Service for Safeguarding. It currently comprises 12 IRO full-time posts (up from 11 following the additional P-T hours agreed), 3 of which are filled by 6 part time staff, 2 Business Support staff who are responsible for taking notes in complex CLA Reviews, and a Team Manager who is line managed by the Service Manager for Safeguarding. The interim Service Manager Emma Walters has now been appointed on a permanent basis.

APPOINTMENT OF IRO'S

The CPCCR Regulations require the Local Authority to appoint Independent Reviewing Officers and specify the categories of persons that the Local Authority may **not** appoint to carry out the IRO function (regulation 54(3) of the CPCCR Regulations). These are:

- A person involved in preparing the child's Part 6 Care and Support Plan or the management of the child's case.
- The child's social worker or personal adviser.
- The representative of the Local Authority appointed to visit the child.
- A person with management responsibilities for any of the above.
- A person with control over the resources allocated to the case.

PURPOSE OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER REVIEWS

Each child who is Looked After must have a Care and Support Plan (referred to as a Part 6 Care and Support Plan). This must be based on a current assessment of the child's needs and be focussed on the well-being outcomes for the child as specified in the SSWB Act. These are:

- Protection from abuse and neglect.
- Promotion of physical and mental health and emotional well-being.
- Promotion of physical, intellectual, emotional, social and behavioural development.
- Maintenance or development of family or other significant personal relationships.
- Involvement in education, training and recreation activities.
- Development and maintenance of social relationships and involvement in the local community.
- Social and economic well-being (including not living in poverty).
- Living in suitable accommodation.

The Part 6 Care and Support Plan details what needs to happen to achieve the child's agreed outcomes and should be formulated in consultation with the child and their family, wherever possible. The review of the plan is a key component of care planning and is a continuous process as it includes monitoring the progress of the plan between Review meetings and responding to any significant change in the child's circumstances. The purpose of the review meeting is to consider how the plan is meeting the well-being outcomes for the child, monitor progress and make decisions to amend the plan or reconfirm previous decisions as necessary considering changed knowledge and circumstances. This takes place in consultation with all those who have a key interest in the child's life, including the child.

Key issues to be addressed in the review process are:

- The child's participation and involvement, including providing the child with clear explanations of the reason for any changes.
- The appropriate involvement of other agencies.
- Supervision and oversight by responsible managers.
- The extent to which progress is being made towards achieving the identified outcomes.

As well as an overall review of the Part 6 Care and Support Plan, the specific areas that must be covered in a Review meeting include:

- For all children who do not have a Permanency Plan, what is being done to enable them to return home.
- Is the placement meeting the child's needs, and are any services being provided at an additional to the basic cost of placement appropriate/still required.
- The views of all involved in the Reviewing process, including the child, parents and carers.

- Has the child been visited as required both by the CPPCR Regulations, RCT CLA Schedule of Visiting Guidance and by the needs of the child.
- The child's perception of their relationship with their social worker.
- Has an active offer of advocacy been made and the child's communication/preferred choice of language been addressed.

The planning and reviewing processes must promote the participation of the child and their family.

The IRO has specified responsibilities, set out in the CPPCR Regulations and practice guidance, for monitoring the progress of the responsible LA in implementing a child/young person's Part 6 Care and Support Plan. IROs are now required to track the progress of the Part 6 Care and Support Plan between Review meetings, and to consult with the child at any time that there is a significant change to the Plan. Local authority staff are required to alert the IRO to any significant change to the child's Part 6 Care and Support Plan, or of any failure to implement decisions arising from a Review.

The IRO has the authority to determine when a Review meeting should be convened in the light of a change of circumstances. IROs are also required to raise concerns within the LA up to Chief Executive level and refer unresolved concerns to CAF/CASS as appropriate. This is explained more fully under the section dealing with the IRO Resolutions process.

FREQUENCY OF REVIEWS

Children Looked After (CLA) review meetings must be conducted at the following frequency:

- Within 28 days of a child becoming Looked After or having an unplanned change of placement.
- Subsequently within 3 months.
- 6 monthly thereafter.
- Children receiving a series of short breaks under S76 SSWB Act should be reviewed within 3 months of the start of the first period and thereafter 6 monthly.
- Reviews of family plans produced by the Integrated Family Support Service are held three times per year. The initial review is held 28 days after the start of the intensive phase, the second review 3 months later and the final review after 6 months.

Review meetings should be brought forward if there is a significant change in the child's Part 6 Care and Support Plan, there are issues around the child's safety or there has been a failure to carry out an important aspect of the plan.

In cases where a child is placed for the cycle begins again from the date the child is placed with an adoptive family.

THE RESOLUTIONS PROCESS

The IRO has responsibility to monitor the Local Authority's performance in relation to care planning for individual children and to raise areas of good practice as well as problems and issues. IROs also forward compliments and positive comments to staff and managers to ensure good practice is recognised.

The IRO Resolution Protocol sets out the process for raising and resolving issues within set timescales that are intended to avoid unnecessary drift and delay in care planning. The protocol recognises the need to resolve issues as quickly as possible but allows for resolutions to be escalated where agreement cannot be reached or where there continues to be drift and delay.

There are currently 5 stages to the process:

- Stage 1: Resolution through discussion with the Team Manager.
- Stage 2: Resolution put in writing to the Team Manager.
- Stage 3: Resolution meeting with Service Manager
- Stage 4: Escalation to Head of Service.
- Stage 5: If the issue remains unresolved, referral to the Service Director, Group Director Community & Children's Services, Chief Executive and CAFCASS are additional steps to be taken by the IRO if required.

In practice, stages 1 and 2 are frequently having to be conflated to avoid unnecessary drift.

Some Resolutions involve concerns about the actions or lack of action by other agencies, and these will either be raised with the Children's Services Manager to address, or where necessary directly with the agency involved or via the CLA Quality Assurance Panel.

Raising Resolutions is one of the key responsibilities of the IRO, which has been reinforced by recent case law which has determined that the IRO can be held personally liable if there have been failures in the care planning or an abuse of the child's human rights, and the IRO has not raised this appropriately. It is critical that the IROs are supported by the Local Authority recognising that this aspect of their role is crucial both in terms of flagging up any concerns about the L.A's performance as a Corporate Parent and to ensure that no child's human rights are being violated as a result of a failure in implementing their Care and Support Plan.

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