



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

13TH SEPTEMBER 2021

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE MONITORING REPORT TO THE
GROUP DIRECTOR COMMUNITY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of the report is to provide the lead Director for Children and Young People with information about the discharge of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) functions for children looked after (CLA) for the period **1st January 2021 – 30th June 2021**. 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), 4 of which are filled by 8 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.

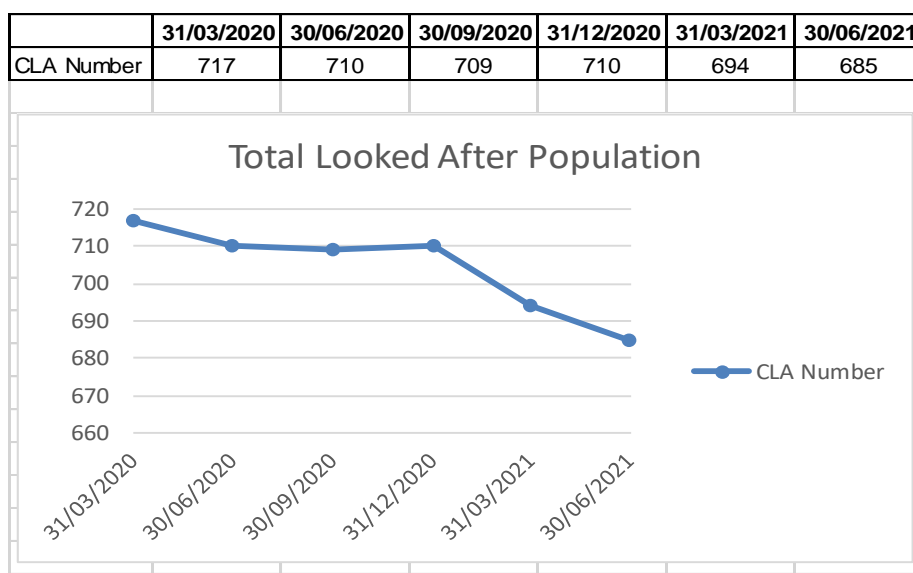
As a result of COVID all the service functions are currently being delivered remotely. Whilst necessary under the circumstances, this creates challenges for the service as best practice is that these meetings should be held face-to-face and at the child's preferred venue (e.g.,

placement, school). The service continues to use MST to hold meetings virtually, however we are continuing to strive toward a 'hybrid' approach to ensure children and families have choice of their preferred style of meeting. The service has very recently seen the implementation of 5 digital packs within our corporate buildings and a further ICF bid has been made for additional digital packs that can be used within community setting to promote greater participation in accessible, child friendly settings.

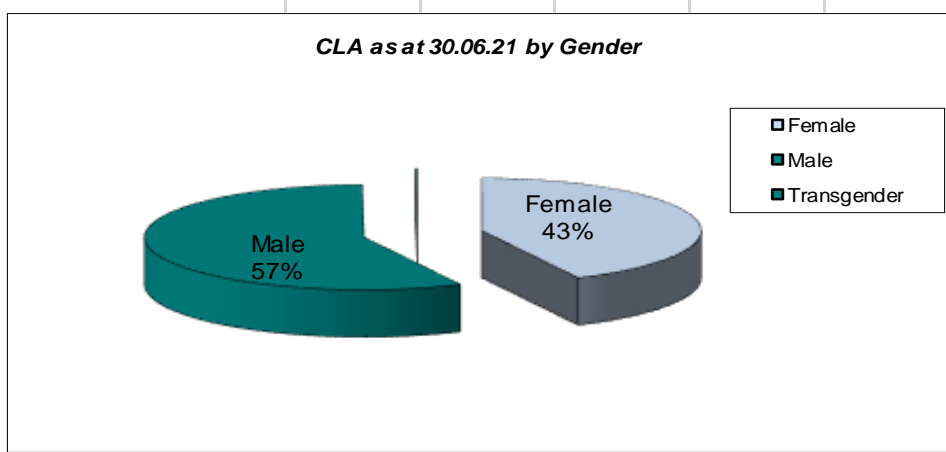
IRO's continue to WFH, chairing complex and emotionally charged meeting remotely and whilst the technology remains unreliable on occasions, they remain committed to ensuring high quality and inclusive meetings. The service has continued to operate to the same capacity and despite the many challenges faced since the beginning of the pandemic their commitment and professionalism remains resolute in ensuring the best outcomes for children looked after.

4. PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

Total Looked After Population (30th June 2021)

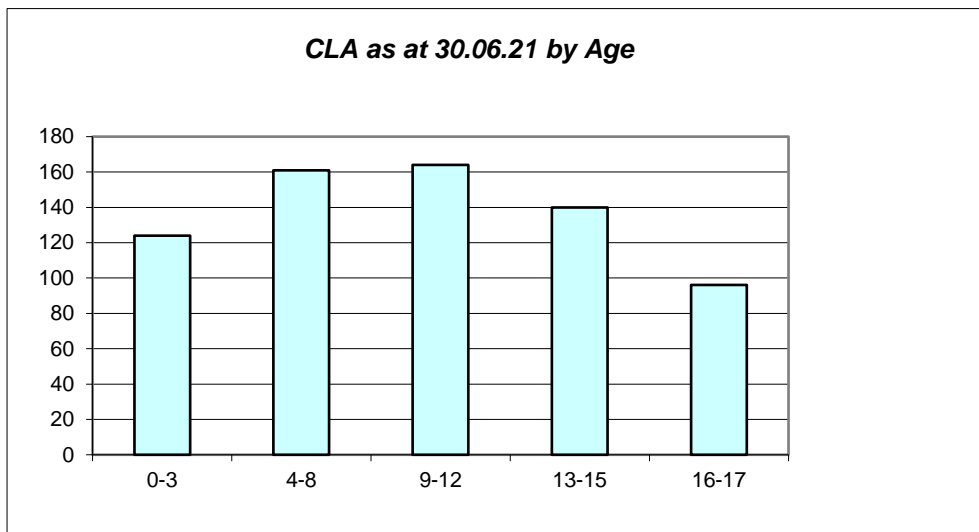


Looked After Population by Gender

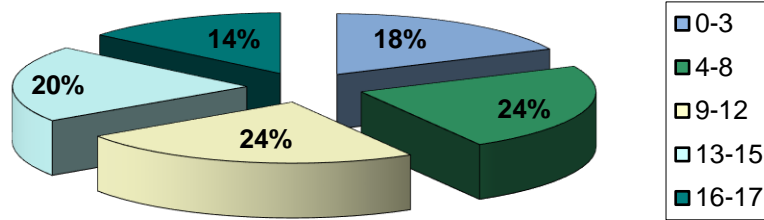


	CLA as at 31.03.20 by Gender	CLA as at 30.06.20 by Gender	CLA as at 30.09.20 by Gender	CLA as at 31.12.20 by Gender	CLA as at 31.03.21 by Gender	CLA as at 30.06.21 by Gender
Female	303	297	302	301	296	293
Male	414	413	407	409	397	391
Transgender	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	717	710	709	710	694	685

Looked After Population by Age Group

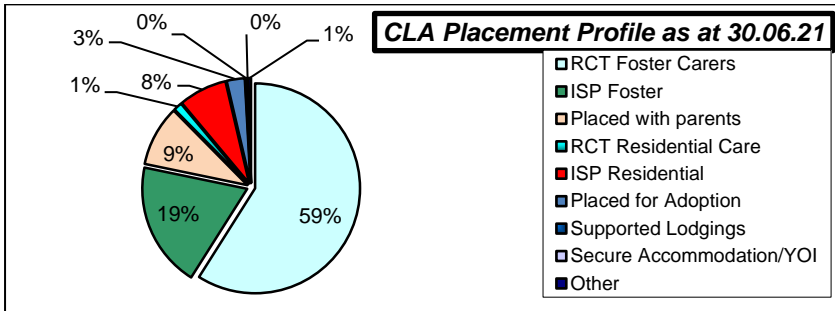


CLA as at 30.06.21 by Age



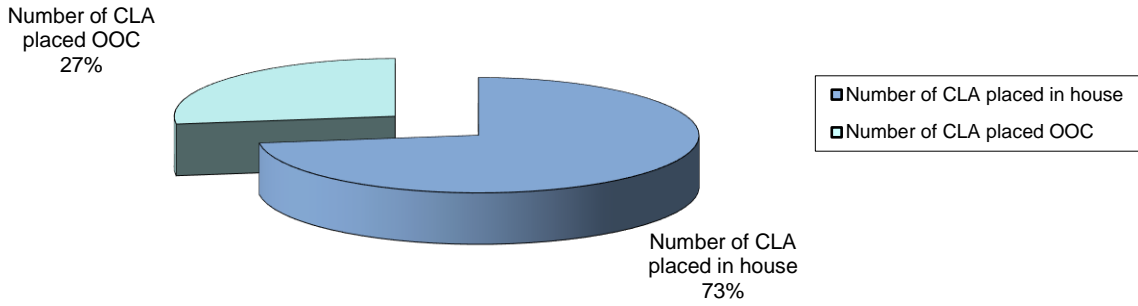
	0-3	4-8	9-12	13-15	16-17	Total
CLA as at 31.03.20 by Age	133	174	170	136	104	717
CLA as at 30.06.20 by Age	134	172	162	137	105	710
CLA as at 30.09.20 by Age	132	175	167	137	98	709
CLA as at 31.12.20 by Age	139	165	174	145	87	710
CLA as at 31.03.21 by Age	126	163	174	142	89	694
CLA as at 30.06.21 by Age	124	161	164	140	96	685

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



	Mar-20	Jun-20	Sep-20	Dec-20	Mar-21	Jun-21
RCT Foster Carers	394	399	393	392	404	404
ISP Foster	161	152	152	145	139	132
Placed with parents	70	67	65	77	70	64
RCT Residential Care	11	11	10	7	11	9
ISP Residential	52	52	55	57	50	51
Placed for Adoption	22	25	29	26	16	19
Supported Lodgings	6	3	3	3	1	2
Secure Accommodation/YOI	0	0	1	1	1	1
Other	1	1	1	2	2	3
Total	717	710	709	710	694	685

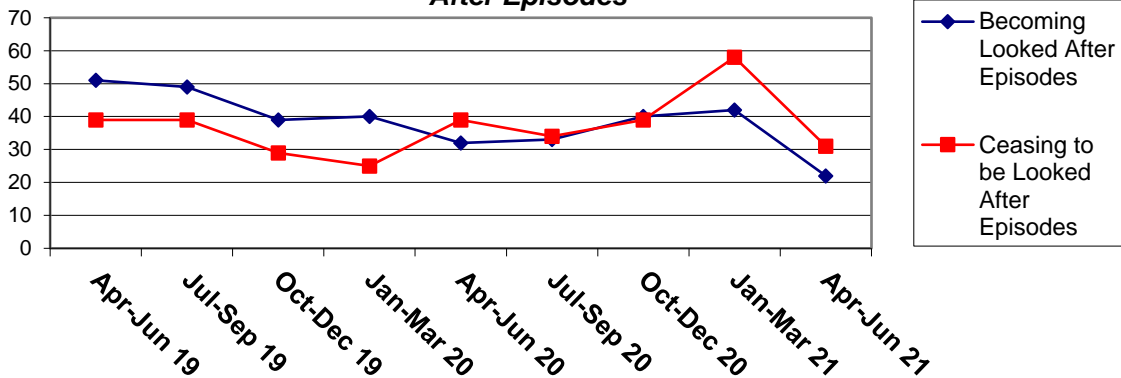
Number of In House/OOC Placements as at 30.06.21



	Mar-20	Jun-20	Sep-20	Dec-20	Mar-21	Jun-21
Number of CLA placed in house	503	514	495	499	508	499
Number of CLA placed OOC	214	196	214	211	186	186
Total CLA	717	710	709	710	694	685
% OOC	29.8%	27.6%	30.2%	29.7%	26.8%	27.2%

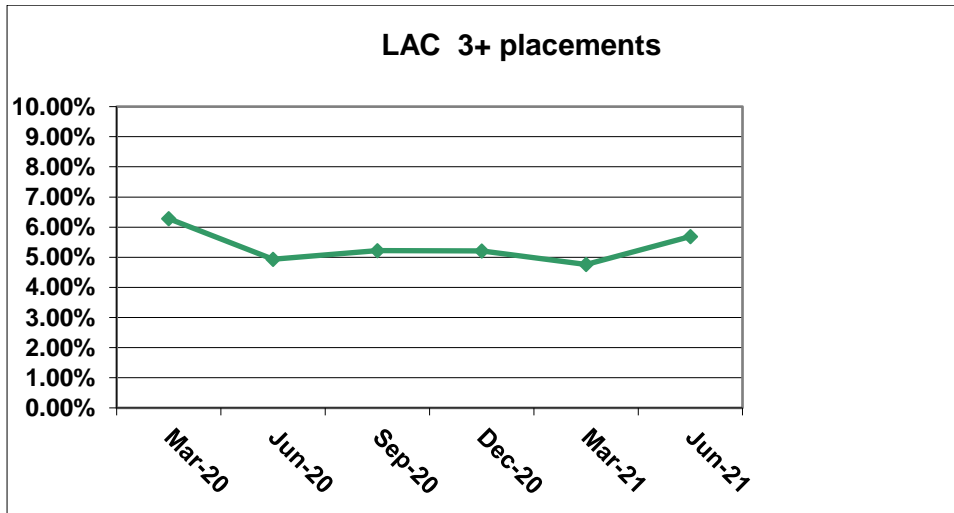
Admissions and Discharge Information

The number of Becoming Looked After & Ceasing to be Looked After After Episodes



	Apr-Jun 19	Jul-Sep 19	Oct-Dec 19	Jan-Mar 20	Apr-Jun 20	Jul-Sep 20	Oct-Dec 20	Jan-Mar 21	Apr-Jun 21
Becoming Looked After Episodes	51	49	39	40	32	33	40	42	22
Ceasing to be Looked After Episodes	39	39	29	25	39	34	39	58	31

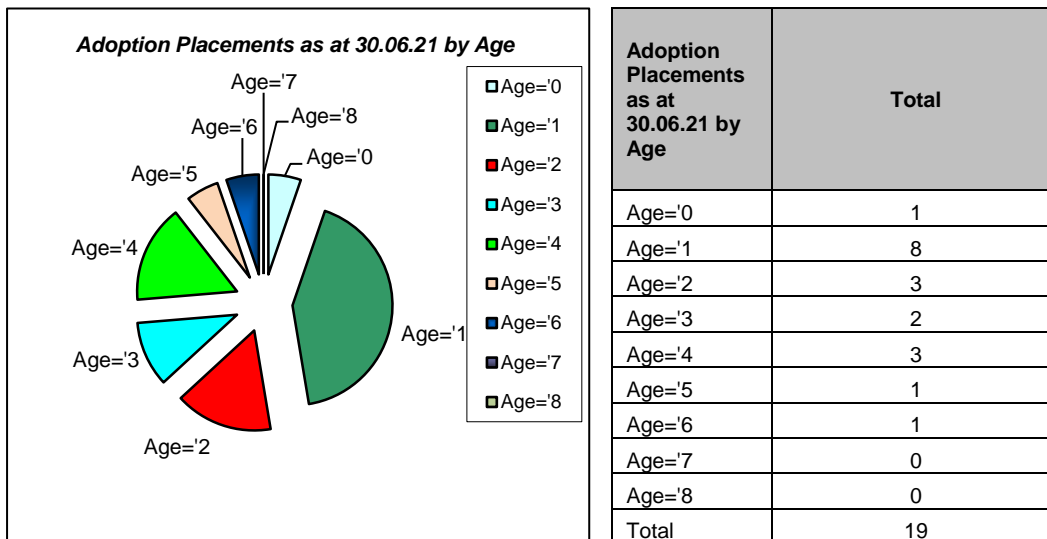
Placement Stability

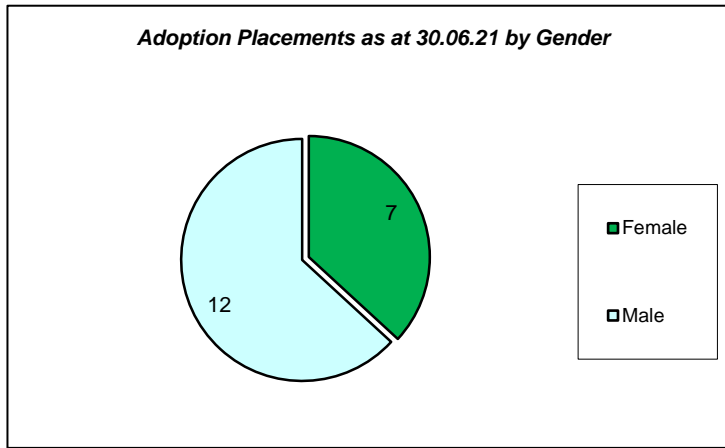


	Mar-20	Jun-20	Sep-20	Dec-20	Mar-21	Jun-21
% 3+ placements	6.28%	4.93%	5.22%	5.21%	4.76%	5.69%

Adoption Information

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





Adoption Placements as at 30.06.21 by Gender	Total
Female	7
Male	12
Total	19

Adoption Information	Total
Number of children placed for adoption as at 30.06.21	19
Number of children placed for adoption between 01.07.20 - 30.06.21	23
Number of Children adopted between 01.07.20 - 30.06.21	29

5. REVIEW ACTIVITY 1st January 2021 – 30th June 2021

CLA Numbers:

Overall, we are seeing a reduction in admission figures, and the number of CLA admissions during the period January 2021 to June 2021 decreased by 25 when compared to the same period in 2020, a 4% decrease in admissions.

During this reporting period (covering Q 4 & Q1) the total number of children looked after fluctuated between 710 and 685 - a reduction in overall numbers on the previous reporting period. During the current year, numbers of admissions fluctuated with our lowest figure being 7 in numerous months and the highest of 22 in December 2020. 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 30.06.21, 33% of admissions are children aged under 1 year old. The numbers have increased by 6 when compared to the same period in 2019-20 and the trend shows that this age group continues to have the highest number of admissions. 23 out of the 45 babies (under 1) becoming looked after were boys

The number of children aged 1-4 becoming looked after has decreased by 9 compared to last year's figures, from 36 (23%) children in 2019-20 to 23 (17%) children in 2020-21.

The number of children being brought into care aged 16+ has decreased by 4 when compared to the same period from 12 in 2019-20 to 8 which is 6% of the overall figure in 2020-21.

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 the end of 30.06.21 most children are placed with Relative Carers (35%). This figure includes approved and non- approved kinship carers. The number has increased by 2 when compared to the same time last year.

In House Foster Care placements continue to be higher than Independent Sector Foster Care. The number of Independent Foster Care placements has decreased by 12% when compared to last year.

The number of Mother and Baby placements has decreased from 8 to 3 over the last 12 months.

The number of children placed with parents has remained the same when compared to last year.

73% of looked after children were residing within RCT on the 30.06.21. 186 children were in placements outside of RCT, a 5% decrease when compared with the same reporting period last year, and of these, 12 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 dropped slightly since Quarter 4 2020/2,1 where we achieved 4.8% at year end.

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.

Admissions and Discharges:

64 children became looked after between 01.01.21 & 30.06.21. This is a 11% decrease in numbers compared to the same reporting period in 2020.

89 children ceased being looked after between 01.01.21 & 30.06.21. This is a 28% decrease in numbers compared to the same reporting period in 2020 - where 64 children ceased to be looked after.

In relation to where the children reside upon leaving care, 47% of children returned home to Family/Extended Family during the period, which is the highest percentage.

29 children (18%) had Adoption Orders granted, so now reside with their adoptive families.

40 children (25%) remained with foster carers, either as a 'When I'm Ready' arrangement upon turning 18, or through a Special Guardianship Order. Independent living accounted for 12% and these are young people aged 16+.

In relation to the ages of children when they cease being looked after, more children left care aged 18 years - accounting for 29% of the total number.

The second highest age group were aged 1 – 4 years, accounting for 27% of the total. Out of the 44 children in this age group, 61% were adopted and 36% returned home to parents.

The 13 children aged 0-15 who ceased to be looked after, but remained with foster carers, stayed there due to a Special Guardianship Order being granted.

36% of all children that ceased being looked after over the last 12 months were aged 16+.

There are currently 298 care leavers open to the 16+ teams, aged between 18-25 years. 50% of these young people reside in Independent Living placements, which is the highest percentage rate. 49% of the young people in Independent Living placements are aged 18-21 years.

16% of Care Leavers reside with Family or Relatives, and 12% remained with their Foster Carers as part of a 'When I'm Ready' arrangement. There have been 104 young persons placed in When I'm Ready placements since the scheme started in 2015. 51% (53) of these young people remained with their former independent foster carers, 29% (30) with RCT foster carers and 20% (20) with relative carers. Five former WIR placements still return to their carers from University during holiday breaks.

5 young people aged 18-21 years are not engaging with 16+, and their whereabouts are currently unknown.

Of the 285 care leavers aged 18-25 years, 15 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.

Adoption:

22 children have had a Placement Order granted between July 20 to June 21. Of these children, 11 have been placed with prospective adopters and the remaining 11 children are residing in foster care placements.

In comparison to the previous year, there has been a 16% increase in the number of Placement Orders granted.

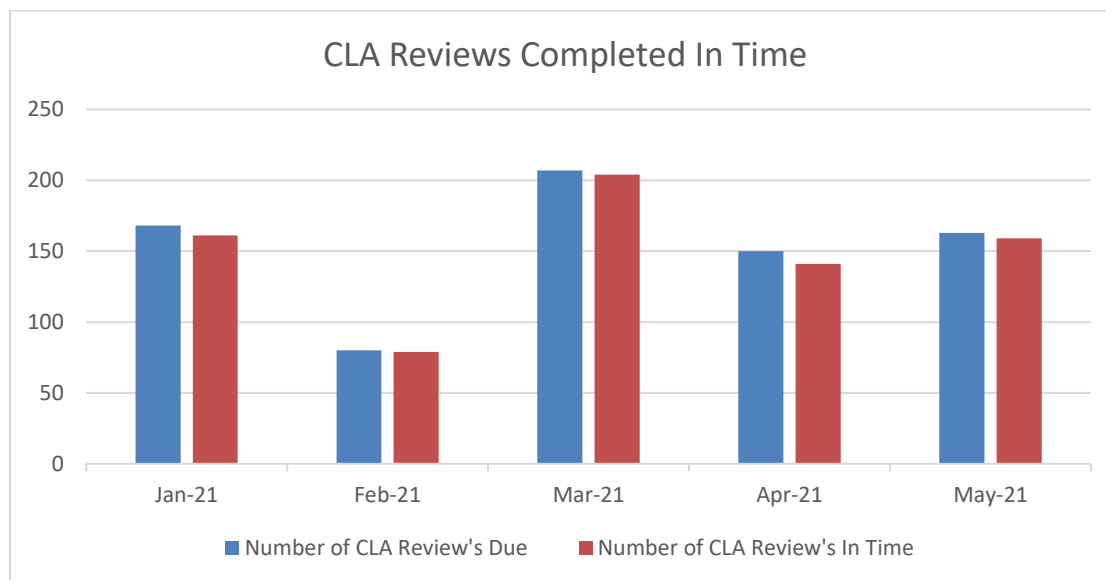
A total of 23 adoption placements were started between Jul 20 to Jun 21, which is a 4% decrease compared to the previous year.

29 Adoption Orders have been granted over the last 12 months which is a 71% increase compared to the previous year.

CLA Reviews

CLA Review's in Time 1st January 2021 – 30th June 2021

918 CLA review meetings were due in this 6-month period, and our CLA Review performance was at 97% at the end of June 2021.



	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Total
Number of CLA Review's Due	168	80	207	150	163	150	918
Number of CLA Review's In Time	161	79	204	141	159	144	888
% In Time	96%	99%	99%	94%	98%	96%	97%

In addition, IROs chaired **12** combined CLA Reviews and Review Conferences, to remove the names of children looked after under Care Orders from the Child Protection Register *and* held **8** IFSS (Integrated Family Support Service) Reviews.

6. REASONS FOR CANCELLATION

Only 30 Reviews were not held in time between January 2021 to June 2021, which has remained stable since the last reporting period, and is 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 - where services and service provision has had to adapt throughout the pandemic. Further reasons for CLA reviews needing to be cancelled, relate to allowing newly allocated workers an 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)

Qtr. 4 - January - March 2020

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

Qtr. 4 – January - March 2021

444 held within timescale and 11 outside. **Total 455 = 97.58%**

Qtr. 1 April - June 2020

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

Qtr. 1 April - June 2021

444 Reviews were held within timescale and 19 outside. **Total 463 = 95.72%**

7. CURRENT ISSUES FOR THE REVIEWING SERVICE

During this reporting period, the reviewing service sought and gained agreement to convert a full-time post into 2 part-time posts, following the request of a full time IRO to reduce his hours. The new working arrangements will come into effect on the 1st September 2021. We have successfully appointed a new part time IRO, and it is hoped their employment will commence on 6th September 2021. Another part time IRO will be leaving the service on the 1st September 2021, following their successful interview for a secondment to a full-time Adoption Senior Practitioner role. Whilst we were hopeful that agency back-filling cover would be available to commence on the 1st September, to avoid any deficit within the team, Randstad have been unable to provide this within the specified timeframe and we have since had confirmation that they will start on the 13th September 2021. The late start date of these appointments will likely cause some additional pressures on the service, whilst the new members of staff commence their employment and have the appropriate induction periods. There will be a transition of cases to the newly appointed IRO's, and it is recognised that some unavoidable delays are probable. This will be carefully monitored by the Reviewing Team Manager and where possible done with as little disruption to children, their families, carers, and practitioners.

We continue to experience ongoing sickness absence within the service, including amongst business support colleagues, which has resulted in

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 part time staff. We have also used the agency Safeguarding Officer, brought into cover 0.3 of the vacant permanent post to chair CLA reviews as required.

During this reporting period and despite the demands placed upon our service, it is important to share with Corporate Parenting Board the extensive work that has been undertaken to address issues relating to the historical backlog of paperwork. Each IRO has had an individual supervision and a backlog plan drawn up with a completion date of 1st September 2021. We recognise as a team that we need to be efficient in disseminating the records of meetings within the statutory timescales, and IRO's have worked tirelessly to ensure this is completed. In the main, most IRO's are on target to complete this, if they have not already done so. The progress is regularly reported to the Head of Service and Service Director as part of the QALF plan.

The new paperwork that is discussed further in this report will assist in more timely completion of paperwork, as well as regular monitoring by the Team Manager and Service Manager, who will ensure robust oversight of this moving forward to avoid any unnecessary delays and build-up of backlogs in the future.

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 currently carrying caseloads higher than we would consider ideal, because of the staffing gaps that have existed (England has set IRO caseload targets that Wales has not) and our new appointments will hopefully assist in seeing numbers reduce, contributed to by the positive downward trend of children becoming looked after evidenced within the body of this report. It was noted in the last reporting period that 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 must be rescheduled. Whilst this continues to cause some issues for the service, we are continuing to work closely with our colleagues in Intensive Intervention and DCT to establish robust processes and systems to avoid any unnecessary postponements and/or cancellations.

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

In total **13** resolutions were raised in this reporting period, 2 more than previously reported. This continues to be 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 most children are having their needs met, it should be noted that during the pandemic IRO's have continued to be mindful of the demands and challenges experienced by frontline social workers as they adjusted to the agile working practices, and they have sought to resolve issues informally wherever appropriate.

Theme: Adult Respite Provision

Many of our children remain in their placements under 'When I'm Ready', or 'Shared Lives'. It is expected that assessments will be completed in a timely manner and resources identified and agreed before the child's 18th birthday. Where a child has needs or disabilities, they will often require additional support and resources to those provided by the 16+ Service

Resolution: The Adult Services Panel had agreed in 2020 to fund a respite placement for a child beyond their 18th birthday in 2021, but the process of identifying respite provision was delayed by the impact of Covid and subsequent lockdowns - when respite was only being provided to meet critical need and emergencies. However Adult Services did give an undertaking to identify a provision before the child's 18th birthday, but this was still outstanding with her 18th birthday fast approaching, and the carers did not feel confident that they could meet her needs without respite provision.

The IRO therefore raised a resolution with Adult Services, asking that respite provision be identified as a matter of urgency.

Outcome: Adult Services identified a respite provision within a few weeks of the resolution, and had arranged for the child and carers to visit. Both were pleased with the setting and assessment visits were arranged, along with a date for the first overnight stay.

Resolution: Failure to inform the IRO of significant change

Staff of the LA are required to alert the IRO of any significant changes to the child's Part 6 Care and Support Plan, or of any significant failure to implement decisions arising from a review (Reg.43 of the CPPCR Regulations). A significant change would include changes to a child's permanence plan, such as a placement breakdown or unplanned move. Where well established arrangements for a child suddenly break down, the IRO should schedule a new review with all involved parties to consider a new short-term plan and the options that are to be considered for longer term objectives

Resolution: The IRO was informed in a CLA review that a 17-year-old young man had moved placements 3 months earlier and was now living with his mother. The IRO had not been informed, and furthermore Placement with Parents had not been completed. Whilst the IRO acknowledged in the resolution that in reality the young man would likely refuse to leave his mother's home, it was the recommendation of the CLA review that a robust agreement should be drawn up with the family to ensure that his needs were met and there were clear expectations agreed by the child, parent and practitioners.

Outcome: The IRO received reassurances that risk assessments had been undertaken and that the information had been shared and agreed with the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) along with an acknowledgement that this should have been discussed with the IRO in a timely manner. As a result of the IRO's resolution, a robust contract of expectations was written and agreed with family members.

Theme: Placement with Parents meetings not having taken place.

When a child who is subject to a Care Order is returned to the care of a parent, they should do so with the agreement of the Head of Service under Placement with Parents Procedures (PWP). An assessment should be completed, and the views of partner agencies sought to ensure that the ADM is able to make an informed decision. There is an expectation within RCT Children's Services that PWP meetings will be held with the family, social worker, and relevant professionals at 6 weekly intervals to review the progress of the plan.

Resolution: During a discussion with an Assessor Care Manager for a child placed at home under Placement with Parents, it was evident that these meetings had not been taking place and that the worker wasn't aware of the expectations that 6 weekly meetings should be taking place. The resolution was raised to inform the Team Manager.

Outcome: Supervision was brought forward in response to the resolution, to enable the Team Manager to ensure that the expectations were formally discussed and recorded with the Assessor Care Manager.

Theme: Life Journey Work

A recurring theme in respect of resolutions is the need for life journey work. During this reporting period, 3 resolutions have been raised in relation to completing 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 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.

Resolution: The permanence plan for the child was for an application to be made for a Special Guardianship Order and it was agreed that life journey work needed to be completed before the SGO was granted. The IRO was informed in the subsequent review meeting that the life journey work had not been completed, although the application for the SGO was going to be filed imminently.

Outcome: Whilst the response to the resolution explained that the application for the SGO was not at the stage the IRO had been led to believe, the Team Manager nonetheless agreed that the work needed to be prioritised and agreed timescales with the IRO for this to be done, so as not to delay the process unnecessarily. The IRO received confirmation that the work had been completed within 4 weeks of the resolution being raised.

9. DEVELOPMENT WORK

During this reporting period, the reviewing service held a face-to-face development day with IRO's to evaluate their roles and responsibilities, current policies, and procedures, including the Resolution Protocol. We are hopeful to finalise these protocols in consultation with key stakeholders in the next CLA QAP.

It was reported in the last report to the CPB, that measures were being introduced to ensure that Mid-Point Reviews, as detailed in the AFA Cymru best practice guidelines, are being held. From September 2021, each IRO will undertake this review and record this on the child's record. It is envisaged that this will alert the IRO to any drift in care planning that may require a resolution or consideration of a CLA review being brought forward.

Hybrid Meeting:

As noted in the body of this report, we are continuing to strive toward a 'hybrid' approach to ensure children and families have choice of their preferred style of meeting. Whilst Child Protection Conferences are a priority for the service currently, some IRO's are starting to facilitate 'hybrid' CLA Reviews if requested by the young person and/or their carer's.

Developing a new CLA Review document:

It was reported previously that the Reviewing Team had drafted a new CLA review document, but that its introduction has been delayed as frontline teams managed the challenges of agile working during the pandemic. The documents are currently being reviewed before their introduction, to ensure that they clearly capture the voice of the child and any themes relating to what is going well for the child and what may not be going so well. It is envisaged this will allow us to draw out quantitative data in respect of the child's voice - to complete more qualitative and thematic audits to improve service delivery and highlight the lived experience of looked after children.

Consultation Documents:

The consultation documents are being updated with the support of RCT's Research and Information Officer. It is hoped that the new consultation documents will enable children looked after to raise questions about their own wishes and feelings, as well as sharing their experiences whilst in care.

Work has also concentrated on the appearance and the accessibility of the documents. Whilst the Consultation documents themselves are nearing completion, we are looking at incorporating "widgets" (emoji type graphics), which are used in different settings, including education, as a communication tool for children with disabilities.

The consultation documents will be readily accessible to children on both the 2 Sides Website and the WICCID website. They will also be embedded in the invitations sent out for review meetings.

The progress of this continues to be monitored in CLA QAP.

Adoption Review Documentation:

Considering 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, The VOG, as well as VVC. This work was piloted in early 2020 with the expectation was that it would be reviewed in May 2020. Unfortunately, the pandemic has meant that the pilot has not yet been reviewed as planned, although we have continued to use the pilot documentation, which

we consider to be an improvement.

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 COUNCILS 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.