



## Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report

<b>Reporting Period</b>	01.04.2020 – 31.03.2021
<b>Reporting to</b>	Corporate Parenting Panel and The Bradford Partnership
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## **1. Introduction**

This Annual report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the Independent Reviewing Service in Bradford as required by statutory guidance.

The Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO) Annual Report must be presented to the Corporate Parenting Board and Bradford Partnership.

The IRO service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children in care and for challenging drift and delay.

This report provides an opportunity to highlight areas of good practice and areas for improvement, identify themes and trends and report on work undertaken to date and to outline the developmental priorities for the next twelve months.

## **2. Profile of the IRO team**

The IRO Service sits within the Safeguarding and Reviewing Unit with its core functions consisting of reviewing plans for children in care and monitoring the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding responsibilities.

The IRO Service in Bradford currently consists of

- Head of Service
- Service Manager
- Two IRO Team Managers
- 15.2 FTE Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)
- 3 FTE Foster Care Reviewing Officers (FCRO's)

The two IRO teams are comprised slightly differently. One team has 9.2 FTE IROs and the other team has 5.6 FTE IROs in addition to the 3 FCRO's. This split has been established to ensure management consistency of the FCRO to develop and embed their side of the service.

The Head of Service reports directly to the Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Review, Commissioning and Provider Services in order to assure line management separation of IROs from the Social Work Service.

The last twelve months has seen a lot of development of the staffing structure and service delivery which has the longer term aim of improving stability, oversight and continued development of the service. There is stability within the workforce with 7 IROs who have over 4 years' service in the IRO team providing consistency to a

significant number of our children in care. However, in the last twenty-four months there have been a number of staffing changes as a number of IROs have retired as well as changes caused by staff development in the last twelve months. Only two IROs have left due to other employment opportunities externally (one choosing to move into Higher Education and the other seeking promotion in another Local Authority). There have been a number of vacancies across the service and recruitment has been negatively impacted by the paygrade. However, since the pay award in December 2020, there has been a significant improvement in the ability to recruit. This has had an impact on case allocation at varying times, consistency of IRO for some children and the ability to build on service development.

Since successful recruitment in January 2021, there has been noted progression with securing stability in the service. Recruitment is ongoing for two permanent vacancies; in the interim the service has used agency IROs to ensure that the care planning of children is overseen.

The same IRO will review all the children within a sibling group, regardless of the time each sibling enters care; unless there is a conflict of interest, which maintains continuity for children and parents.

The ethnic and gender balance of the team has seen some changes. There has been a reduction in male IROs due to a number retiring and one being promoted. However, we remain a diverse team with IROs of different ethnicity and nationality. Additionally, through the recent recruitment, we have a younger demographic of IROs than previous years.

All IROs have at least 5 years post qualifying experience as social workers and are registered as Social Workers with Social Work England. Several have held manager roles in other services.

## **2.1 Statutory responsibilities and Additional responsibilities of the IROs**

The statutory requirements for an IRO are -

- a) To chair the first child in care review within 20 working days.
- b) To chair the second review (usually the permanency decision-making review) within 3 months of the first review.
- c) To chairs reviews every 6 months thereafter.
- d) Outcomes of review meetings should be available within 5 working days of the meeting.
- e) The minutes of the review should be completed within 15 working days and disseminated within 20 working days.
- f) IROs should monitor the child's case on an ongoing basis and have oversight of any changes to care planning; deciding whether an earlier review needs to take place.

- g) The IRO should consult with children and young people before their review and ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority.
- h) The IRO should ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child.

IROs additional duties in Bradford include -

- IROs chair all first Supervision Order Reviews for children who conclude Care Proceedings with a Supervision Order, embedding the plan before stepping down fully to the social work team. IROs chair reviews for children subject to Interim Supervision Orders, when there is a sibling within the proceedings who is subject to an Interim Care Order.
- IROs facilitate training workshops for ASYE's as well as routinely participate in working parties to develop aspects of the service.
- To support and promote learning, IROs facilitate reflective practice sessions (case based) within the team alongside experienced IROs supporting newly appointed IROs with mentoring, offering advice and support around the role.

## **2.2 What's changed within the last twelve months**

In the last twelve months there has been the recruitment to both a second IRO Team Manager and Service Manager role. The numbers of IROs has increased (since 2018 there is one additional IRO and 3 FCRO's) to manage demand and service development. The creation of a second IRO Team Manager has improved the oversight of the IROs and created opportunity for the development of the service. The recruitment of the Service Manager enables further oversight of the service, with the capacity to join the service up with Child Protection (CP), Quality Assurance Managers (Reg 44), Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and the Children in Care Council. This is still in the early stages but there is an improving picture in regard to joined up working especially between Child Protection and IRO services as well as development of skills and knowledge.

A pay award has been agreed, aligning pay to neighbouring authorities and improving recruitment outcomes, attracting more experienced practitioners.

There has been robust recruitment improving stability and permanency across the workforce with 4 new IROs being recruited. There are now only two vacancies which are currently in the recruitment process.

There has been planning for Covid Recovery which has provided two time limited additional agency IROs to support caseloads.

In addition, the last twelve months has required IROs to adjust to virtual working due to the impact of Covid and 'working from home' requirements.

We have developed a parent/carer feedback form to ensure we listen to parents/carers views about the review process and respond as appropriate to any changes we can make to improve the Child in Care review process.

There has been a review and change to the IRO Challenge and Resolution process to ensure that the stages of escalation are more robust, timely and therefore challenge more effectively. The journey from stage 1 through to stage 3 challenge is now structured and requires line management involvement from within the IRO service and social work teams.

There has been development of the outcomes form which provides more effective data about achieving permanency for children in care.

There has been development of good practice guides for the IRO service and supervision of IROs; improving consistency of practice and offering more targeted, reflective supervision across the breadth of cases.

There has been improved oversight by the IROs on case files, including mid-way checks and closing oversight case notes by the IRO and IRO Team Manager.

There has been development of IRO team meetings, ensuring that there is more reflective practice and case discussion, alignment to business and practice changes within area teams and improving relationships with partner agencies.

There has been robust recruitment for Foster Carer Reviewing Officers and the development of an independent service to review all approved foster carers within Bradford Council. This is a significant development within the team and improves overview of care planning for children placed in both mainstream and connected person placements.

There has been a review of the current audit form and development of a new audit form which aligns to practice guidance.

We are improving the profile of the IRO service across social work teams and partner agencies. This involves attending team meetings and presenting information about the IRO service as well as developing relevant links with partner agencies.

Allocation of cases to IROs is now undertaken by the IRO Team Managers, providing improved oversight and direction of the salient issues to be addressed.

The service has reviewed and updated the Child in Care and Child Protection Dual Status process to ensure that Child Protection plans are ended as appropriate, in a timely manner whilst considering safeguarding measures to protect the child as required.

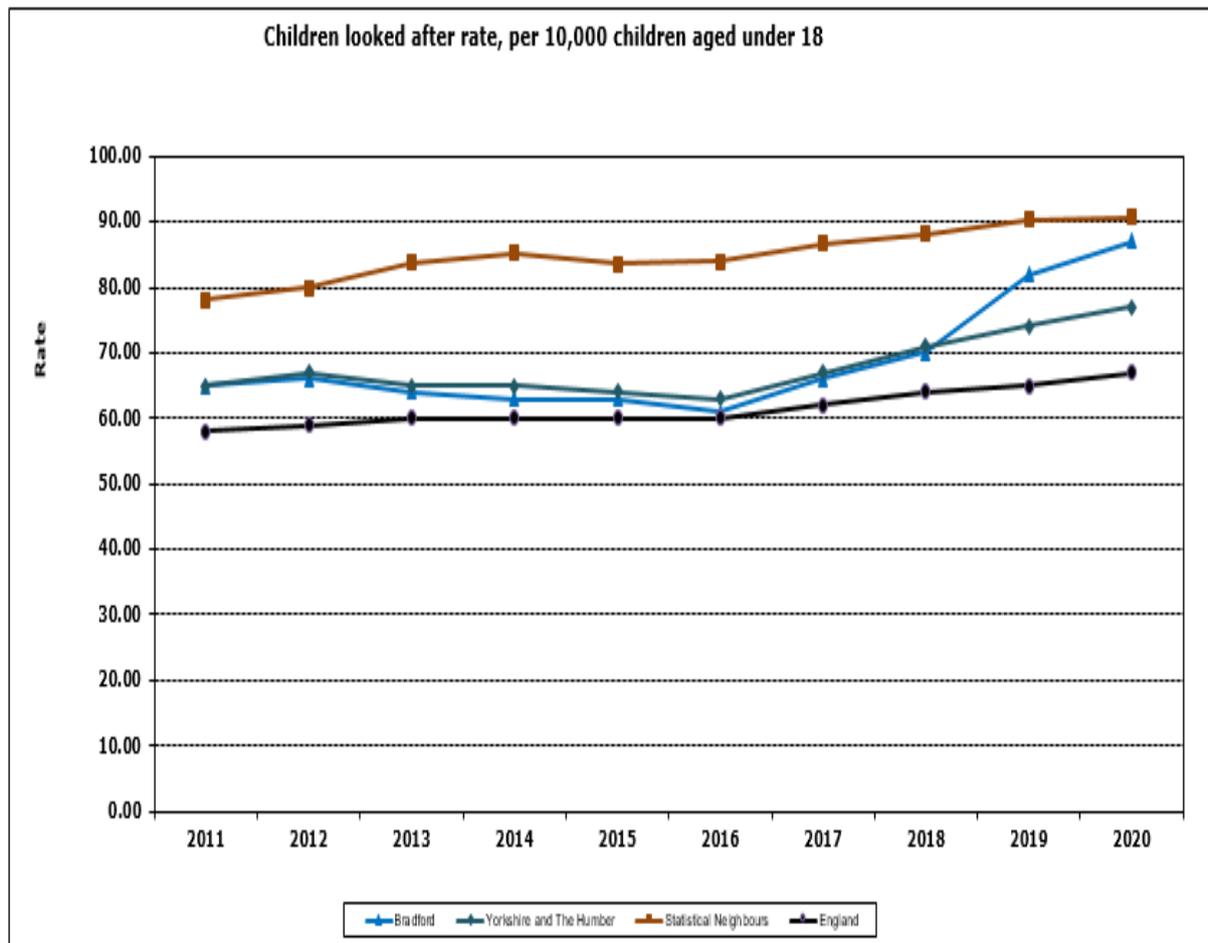
### 3. Quantitative information about the IRO Service

From April 2020 to March 2021, 509 children and young people entered care and 405 left care. Compared to April 2019 to March 2020, 522 children entered care and 435 left care. This is a decrease of 2.5% in children entering care and 7.4% decrease in children leaving care.

#### 3.1 Number of Children in Care

In April 2020 to March 2021 there were 1352 children in the care of Bradford Council compared to 1246 for the previous year. This is an 8.5 increase in the child in care population.

Bradford consistently has a higher rate of children in care per 10,000 children compared to Yorkshire and Humber and England. The numbers of children in care has increased dramatically although has continued to remain lower than statistical neighbours.



## Children entering care

Table 1

	2018	2019	2020	Changes from previous year
Bradford	24.00	35.00	36.00	1.00
Yorkshire and The Humber	27.00	27.00	28.00	1.00
Statistical neighbours	34.00	31.60	28.90	-2.70
England	27.00	27.00	26.00	-1.00

The data above highlights that prior to the Inspection in 2018 Bradford's rates of children entering care was lower than Yorkshire and Humber, England and Bradford's statistical neighbours.

Post to the 2018 Inspection which resulted in Bradford entering an Improvement Journey the numbers of children entering care in Bradford increased significantly. It can be argued the Inspection outcome had a clear impact upon Bradford's threshold response resulting in the significant increase in entries to care.

Between 2019 and 2020 the numbers remain stable but continue to be significantly higher than Yorkshire and the Humber, England and Bradford's statistical neighbours.

## Children leaving care

Table 2

	2018	2019	2020	Changes from previous year
Bradford	21.00	23.00	30.00	7.00
Yorkshire and The Humber	24.00	24.00	26.00	2.00
Statistical neighbours	31.70	29.30	27.90	-1.00
England	25.00	25.00	25.00	0.00

Comparing the data of children entering care to those leaving care; a greater rate of children were leaving care in Bradford in 2020 than Yorkshire & Humber, England and Bradford's statistical neighbours.

As Bradford moves through the Improvement Journey there is focussed work around discharging care orders or replacing with more permanent orders i.e. Special Guardianship which has helped achieve permanency for children.

However, the impact of this on case load numbers is effectively lost due to the rates of children entering care. Social Workers in Bradford continue to have high caseloads which is recognised in on-going Ofsted monitoring visits.

It is anticipated that the numbers of children exiting care (other than through turning 18) will be affected due to the delays in Court which have occurred due to Covid restrictions.

### 3.2 Children who entered Care by Legal Orders

Compared to 2019/20 there has been an increase in the use of Section 46 of the Children Act (Police Powers of Protection) and it is highly likely that this is linked to some extent to the imposition and easing of lockdown. As Managers it is our view that the use of Section 46 has been an appropriate intervention.

Table 3

Legal Order	2019 – 2020	2020 -2021
Accommodated Section 20	282	236
Interim Care Order	158	184
Police Powers of Protection	62	77
Other	20	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>522</b>	<b>509</b>

### 3.3 Child in Care by Legal Status

There has been a reduction in the number of children in care subject to Section 38.6 Interim Care Orders. It is possible that this is evidence that Bradford's initial response to the inspection and thresholds are starting to improve. This could also be an indication of the impact of the Legal Gateway Panel (a panel that agrees whether or not to initiate legal proceedings), better use of the PLO process<sup>1</sup> and the role of the Court Consultants in reviewing evidence pre and during care proceedings.

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<sup>1</sup> The Public Law Outline (PLO) process takes place when the Local Authority is concerned about a child's wellbeing and unless positive steps are taken to address and alleviate those concerns, the Local Authority may consider making an application to the Court. The PLO process is therefore the last opportunity for parents to make improvements to their parenting before care proceedings are issued.

The PLO process sets out the duties that the Local Authority has when thinking about taking a case to court to ask for a Care Order or Supervision Order to be made. It is important to note that where a social worker feels that the risk of harm to a child is so great, or matters are so urgent, a decision may be made that the case should go straight to Court. The PLO process usually lasts for around 3 months but can be extended if there is any outstanding work that needs to be completed.

<https://www.familylawgroup.co.uk/site/blog/flg-news/what-is-the-public-law-outline-process>

Respite provision (for example at Valley View and Clockhouse) during the pandemic was not initially available to children and young people which could attribute to the 40% decrease in children accessing respite. This was also of relevance to existing children in care who would have normally accessed respite provision.

Table 4

<b>Legal Status</b>	<b>31/03/2020</b>	<b>31/03/2021</b>	<b>Differential</b>
Care Order S31.1(A) CA 1989	791	845	6.39% increase
Interim Care Order S38 CA 1989	252	281	10.3% increase
Placement Order	74	86	13.9% increase
Remand or Committed For Trial or Sentence	2	2	0%
S20 - Series of Placements >75 nights per year or multiple providers	5	3	40% decrease
S20 - Single Placement	102	111	8.1% increase
Section 38.6 Interim Care Order	54	24	55% decrease
<b>Total</b>	<b>1246</b>	<b>1352</b>	

### 3.4 Placement type for Children in Care

There has been an increase in the use of mother and baby placements. In some of these cases the IROs have observed that the placements do not necessarily address the community risks that were identified in the initial single assessment.

Over a quarter of children in care are currently living with connected carers which indicates that the social work teams are actively identifying family options. This is in addition to the number of children placed with their parent's evidencing that over a third of children in care remain within their family network.

Table 3 evidences that 51 children on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 were subject to Placement Orders but had not yet moved to an adoptive placement. It is unknown if the pandemic has contributed to this figure.

Table 5

Placement type	Number
Foster Care	555
Connected Person	372
Placed for Adoption	35
Placed with Parents	163
Residential	119
Supported accommodation / Lodging	93
Independence	4
Mother and Baby Unit	5
Hospital	1
Remand	2

### 3.5 Age and Gender profile of Children entering Care

Between 2019/20 and 2020/21 there has been a marginal decrease in admissions for babies and a marginal increase in admissions for children between 5 to 10. There has been a decrease of 30 children aged between 1- 4 who entered care in 2020/21. This could be related to the reduced early years provision and monitoring during the pandemic. There has also been a significant increase of females aged between 11-16 who entered care in 2020/21; it has been difficult to establish reasons for this.

Table 6

	31/03/2020			31/03/2021		
Age	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
0 - less than 1	48	53	101	42	57	99
1 - 4	56	56	112	43	39	82
5 - 10	60	62	122	57	69	126
11 - 16	66	74	140	92	71	163
17+	16	31	47	13	26	39
Total	246	276	522	247	262	509

### 3.6 Age Ceased Care

We are aware that a significant number of children turned 18 during 2020/21 which accounts for the high number of children aged 17+ ceasing care. With regards to children aged 16 and 17 who were subject to Care Orders, the pathway plan was to allow the order to lapse rather than seek discharge. Often this was in response to the wishes and feelings of young people.

Table 7

Age Group	Number
0 - less than 1	19
1 – 4	93
5-10	69
11 – 16	72
17+	150
<b>Total</b>	<b>403</b>

### 3.7 Reasons that Children Left Care

During the pandemic, there has been a delays in court capacity to hear new proceedings for discharge of care orders; this has led to a reduction in children leaving care via some of the below permanence options in 2020/21.

Table 8

Reason	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	%
Returned to parents	101	72	28.7% decrease
Supervision Order	61	56	8.2% decrease
Independence (aged 18)	123	137	10.2% increase
Special Guardianship Order	62	60	3.22% decrease
Adopted	34	30	11.7% decrease
Child Arrangements Order	14	7	50% decrease
Other	40	41	2.5% increase
<b>Total</b>	<b>435</b>	<b>403</b>	

### 3.8 Ethnicity Profile of Children in Care

Bradford has a diverse population which is reflected in the number of children in care. The Independent Reviewing Officers ensure that identity is covered in the child in care review process. In addition, there has been some training organised and delivered within the team on issues affecting Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) children in care.

The following table shows that ethnicity information has not always been recorded accurately in 2020/21. The impact of the pandemic and Brexit may have contributed to the reduction in children and young people from Eastern European communities becoming looked after.

Table 9

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>31/03/2020</b>	<b>31/03/2021</b>	<b>Differential in year</b>
Asian/British Asian – Bangladesh	1	9	88.8% increase
Asian/British Asian - Indian	1	1	0%
Asian/British Asian - Other	4	9	55% increase
Asian/British Asian - Pakistani	71	81	12.34% increase
Black/Black British - African	10	19	47.36% increase
Gypsy/Roma	25	15	40% decrease
Information Not Yet Obtained	5	27	81.5% increase
Mixed - Other	8	6	25% decrease
Mixed - White/Asian	29	40	27.5% increase
Mixed - White/Black African	3	6	50% increase
Mixed - White/Black Caribbean	16	14	12.5% decrease
Other Ethnic Group	18	22	18.2% increase
Refused	1	0	100% decrease
White - British	293	220	24.9% decrease

White - Eastern European	28	34	17.6% increase
White - Irish	1	0	100% decrease
White - Other	8	6	25% decrease

### 3.9 Number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (UASC)

All the children in the table below are male and aged 16 and above. There is limited information available due to other ethnic groups not being available as the recording in LCS is linked with the DFE codes. For example, we have Vietnamese young people who are recorded as “other ethnic group” as the recording on LCS does not provide the option to capture this information. There has been little change in the numbers of children who are recorded as UASC over the last two years.

Table 10

Ethnicity	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021
Asian/British Asian - Other	1	3
Asian/British Asian - Pakistani	1	1
Other Ethnic Group	13	13

### 3.10 Children on Child Protection Plan before entering Care (month by month)

There has been significant number of children who were subject to a child protection plan prior to entering care in 2020/21. Child protection processes changed in July 2020 where children who subject to a child protection plan for over two years were reviewed leading to an increase in children entering care.

Table 11

2019 - 2020		2020-2021	
31/04/2019	17	30/04/2020	11
31/05/2019	15	31/05/2020	10
30/06/2019	25	30/06/2020	15
31/07/2019	22	31/07/2020	69
31/08/2019	24	31/08/2020	41
30/09/2019	13	30/09/2020	23

31/10/2019	19	31/10/2020	17
30/11/2019	25	30/11/2020	9
31/12/2019	4	31/12/2020	17
31/01/2020	16	31/01/2021	14
29/02/2020	12	28/02/2021	10
31/03/2020	11	31/03/2021	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>

#### 4 Performance data from the IRO Service

IRO average caseloads have been between 83 – 95 per FTE for the last financial year. Caseloads remain higher than the recommendations set out within the IRO handbook; however, there is a slight reduction from 2019/2020. This remains high on the priority list for improvement.

There have been changes to the allocation process, with the IRO Team Manager having an active role in allocation and closure of cases and managing the workload of IROs.

Additionally, through supervision, there is targeted discussion and challenge around cases to reduce the impact of drift and delay and identifying cases for challenge to improve the timeliness of care planning. Bradford remains on an Improvement Journey following its Ofsted inspection in 2018; the challenges for experienced social work teams has impacted on care planning due to changes of staff. The IRO service has a significant part to play in ensuring that care planning remains on track and permanency is achieved as soon as possible. In the Ofsted focused visit in December 2020, highlighted –

***“the work of the independent reviewing officers ... is beginning to have a positive impact on practice.”***

A total of 3578 Child in Care reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending 31st March 2021. This is compared to 3480 in the year 2019/20. This is a 2.8% increase.

The service has continued to ensure a high percentage of reviews take place on time; 97.3% of reviews were completed on time compared with 97.4% in 2019/2020. The service has set an aspirational figure of 98%. It is positive that performance in this area has remained stable despite the challenges with staffing in the last twelve months.

Changes have been made to Bradford’s reporting of IRO activity within the last twelve months to enable reporting on timeliness of outcomes and timeliness of permanency plans being agreed. The next IRO annual report will be able to report more accurately on this data.

## 5 Child Participation

Table 12

<b>Participation Code</b>	<b>2019 - 2020</b>	<b>2020- 2021</b>
PN0 – child under 4	821	784
PN1 – Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself	1137	897
PN2 – Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf. Child’s views represented by advocate or independent reviewing officer (IRO)	13	14
PN3 – Child attends and conveys his or her views symbolically (non-verbally). If the child is asked a direct question and nods for example, that is defined as a symbolic contribution	20	0
PN4 – Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her (Attendance without contribution)	13	5
PN5 – Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her. Views represented by advocate or independent reviewing officer through texting, written format, phone, audio/video, viewpoint	302	447
PN6 – Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium. For example, texting, written format, phone, audio/video, viewpoint, to someone in the Child in Care Review other than the IRO or Advocate. The IRO has to be satisfied that the views presented are current, accurate and for the purpose of this Child in Care review	1204	1410
PN7 – Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	15	19

There are anomalies within the data reporting of child participation between 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 due to a review of how the PN codes were being interpreted and subsequently the impact of Covid.

Reviewing how PN codes have been interpreted has enabled clarity and consistency on how to record the information, which saw a change in practices and improved accuracy two thirds of the way through the year. Prior to this, IROs were recording PN6 if they had spoken to the child / young person rather than PN5.

Additionally, undertaking Child in Care reviews virtually has impacted upon data. Initially Child in Care reviews were taking place as telephone conferences and there has been a slow progression to virtual platforms such as Webex and Microsoft teams.

This has affected data for a variety of reasons, including a child / young person's willingness to participate fully in virtual meetings and the use of PN3. This has made it challenging to make meaningful comparisons on the data.

## 6 IRO Quality Assurance and Making a Difference

Bradford IRO service reviewed and updated their Challenge and Resolution process in 2020. There is now a clearer process of escalation which involves Stage 1, 2, and 3 evident on the child's file; with oversight through the management structure and clear timeframes for responses.

This was implemented on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

Table 13

Stage of Challenge	Number of Challenges	Escalated	Resolved
Challenge stage 1	205	13	192
Challenge stage 2	31		All resolved
Challenge stage 3	4		All resolved

IROs still use informal challenge processes and utilise mid-way checks to address any areas of concern or worry in regard to the implementation of the child's care plan. A significant proportion of issues are resolved at this level and recorded on the child's file.

The formal Challenge and Resolution process enables the IRO to initiate Challenge 1, addressing any worries with the Team Manager. If the matter is not resolved, then Stage 2 is initiated and there is a formal meeting chaired by the IRO Team Manager

involving the Service Manager. If the matter is still unresolved then there is a formal meeting involving the Service Manager for Safeguarding and the Head of Service for the area team.

It is not always the case that the Challenge process runs concurrently. Issues may be resolved at stage 1 but follow up oversight by the IRO highlights a continuation of the issue and stages 2 and 3 may be initiated at a later date.

There are multiple reasons why a Challenge and Resolution can be initiated by an IRO, as set out in the table below.

Table 14

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Reason why Challenge and Resolution process was started</b>
Care Plan not being updated / poor quality	52
Drift and Delay in care planning	75
Assessments not being updated /poor quality	56
Poor Preparation for the Child in Care review	66
Review Recommendations not being followed up	47
IRO not being notified of significant changes	10
Lack of information sharing	18
Social Work visits to children not being undertaken within statutory timeframe	4
New risks not being assessed	5
Insufficient evidence of the child's voice	4
Insufficient evidence of parent / carer views	1
Case Management oversight	31
Other	16

As cited by Ofsted, the Challenge and Resolution is starting to have an impact across the service as there is more focused accountability for the issues that are raised by the service. This will continue to be embedded over the next financial year.

The Challenge and resolution process is embedded within the casefile recording system of Social Care; however, it is also the responsibility of the IRO to raise challenge and seek resolution across the spectrum of agencies involved with children and young people in care. This process is being developed to ensure that such challenge and resolution is evidenced and learning is consolidated across partner agencies.

Some of the themes that IROs raise as concerns across partner agencies are:

1. Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs) being completed and reviewed in a timely manner and being fit for purpose
2. Personal Education Plans (PEP's) being completed in a timely manner and reflecting the needs of the child / young person with the right use of Pupil Premium.
3. Children and Young People's access to the right school or right education provision when part time timetables are in place.
4. Children and Young People's access to therapeutic support at the right time.
5. The timeliness of completion of Health plans

IROs continue to complete audits on children's files to provide overview in addition to the mid-way checks and challenge process.

296 audits were completed in 2020 – 2021. There has been a fall in completion numbers in 2020 – 2021 as the service has focused improvement in its oversight through the challenge and resolution process and mid-way checks to ensure that any concerns in regard to planning are addressed earlier in the process.

There has also been the development of a number of new staff within the IRO service which has impacted upon the output of audits, as they take time to learn the role.

Additionally, there has been a review and development of a new audit tool, aligned to the Practice Standards and there is a transition phase as we train IROs to ensure consistency with the wider context of auditing.

This will be a targeted area for improvement over 2021 – 2022.

## **6.1 Feedback from Children and Families**

The IRO service has received a number of compliments over 2020-2021. The following are a few examples -

*“The meeting was lovely and informal, though obviously following the agenda so all points were discussed. We were given the opportunity to voice our thoughts on all topics covered. We were made to feel very comfortable and encouraged.” [received from adoptive parents]*

*“By the way – a little compliment – the review was so well structured and to the point. I attend quite a lot of reviews across many different LAs and was so impressed with how you ran the meeting” [received from a Children’s Guardian]*

*“‘Child’ said her and her mum also had a very positive experience with you as the IRO for the previous children in her care.” [feedback from a social worker following a discussion with a child about the Child in Care review process]*

*“...very positive comments which were made in the meeting about the children’s review. You had reviewed ‘child’ the day prior to my meeting and ... seem to have achieved really constructive outcomes in terms of reducing mum’s anxiety about SGO and therefore enabling the carers to feel more positive about progressing with this. The SSW and the carers spoke very positively about the meeting and were really happy about seeing a way forward and being able to secure the children with them-without risking relationships with mum.” [feedback from a FCRO]*

*“.. thank you for your support by managing a challenging meeting” [feedback from a social worker following a complex meeting].*

## **7 Developmental priorities for the next twelve months.**

During the course of the next 12 months we will continue to work towards establishing a stable and permanent workforce. Following successful recruitments in January 2021 we are in a position to reduce the number of agency Independent Reviewing Officers. Although there will remain two agency Independent Reviewing Officers as part of the COVID19 support until further notice.

Independent Reviewing Officers have worked remotely throughout 2020-2021. The Independent Reviewing Officers service is aware that there are plans for a hybrid return to work strategy likely to commence from September 2021. The Independent Reviewing Officers will be looking at incorporating the positives of virtual working, the wishes and feelings of children and young people in terms of consultation and attendance at their review, and returning to established pre-Covid work practices.

There will be a continuation of establishing consistency in IRO quality assurance of care and permanency planning for children and young people, and the IRO footprint on the child’s case file. This includes undertaking mid-way checks to ensure that review recommendations are not subject to drift and delay.

As part of increasing child participation practice viewpoint is being overhauled. This process is being undertaken by a working party drawn from the IRO service.

Independent Reviewing Officer Team Managers are continuing to develop their oversight of IRO performance. This includes focussed supervision for example on permanency options and IRO consultation with the child. IRO performance concerning

challenge, audit, mid-way checks and consultation with the child can be obtained using PowerBi.

A new audit form has been created and will be embedded over the next twelve months. The Independent Reviewing Officers will be expected to improve the number of audits that they complete over a 12-month period.

To continue the high standard of challenge from the Independent Reviewing Officers to the Social Work Teams. Also improve how we evidence our challenge of partner agencies.

The Independent Reviewing Officers will continue to include identity issues and recommendations in the review process. For example, continuing to ensure children obtain EU settled status and their cultural and heritage needs are met in placements that may not be culturally matched.

Work is underway with area Social Work Teams to establish working partnerships, a greater understanding of the Independent Reviewing Officers role and expectations for a child in care review.

The three permanent Foster Carer Independent Reviewing Officers will continue to work with the Fostering Service to ensure that foster carer reviews are held within statutory timescales.

As part of the Independent Reviewing Officers continuing professional development there will be opportunities for them to be off site Practice Educators supporting students in the Social Work Teams.

## **8 Areas for further focus on social work practice issues for the next year**

To continue to highlight the impact of changes in social worker/team manager and social work teams on continuity of care planning for children.

To continue to highlight the importance of conveying the child's lived experience through the use of direct work and incorporation of this in the analysis of assessments to inform care planning.

To continue to highlight the importance of timely decision-making, management oversight and safety planning on incidents of significant harm and permanency planning for children and young people.

To ensure that parents are fully included wherever possible in care planning, regardless of how long the child and young person has been in care.

To continue to ensure that the permanency plan remains the right plan over the lifetime of the child / young person and that all avenues are explored to enable a child or young person to live within their extended family network at the earliest opportunity.

To ensure that those young people moving towards leaving care are well supported and have opportunity to learn the necessary life skills to be successful in independence.

To ensure that social workers are robustly challenging partner agencies to ensure that the care plan for the child / young person is fit for purpose.

Helen Cliffe  
Service Manager  
31 May 2021

Chris Reeves  
IRO Team Manager  
31 May 2021

Nazia Khatoon  
IRO Team Manager (Acting)  
31 May 2021