



Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report

Reporting Period	01.04.2021 – 31.03.2022
Reporting to	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 FTE Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)
- 3 FTE Fixed Term 2 year contracts (IROs)
- 3 FTE Foster Care Independent Reviewing Officers (FIRO's)

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 two IRO teams are comprised slightly differently. One team has 8.6 FTE IROs and 3 FTE Fixed Term 2 year contracts and the other team has 6.4 FTE IROs in addition to the 3 FIRO's. This split has been established to ensure management consistency of the FIRO to develop and embed their side of the service.

The IRO Team Managers role has been stable for one team, but there has been changes in other team due to staff sickness. Initially this post was overseen by an IRO who stepped up temporarily, later achieving success in progressing to the role of Child Protection Team Manager; more recently the role has been supported by an agency IRO Team Manager.

The last twelve months has continued the development of the teams 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 6 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 twelve months there have been some staffing changes. There has been the creation of posts as well as recruitment to 2 permanent posts that were being supported by agency staff. We had two IROs leave the service in 2021 and another IRO role became vacant due to the initial step up into IRO management and later successful recruitment to the role of CP Team Manager.

By the end of March 2022 we had adverts out for the 3 Fixed term contracts, which will replace the Covid Recovery posts which are covered by agency IROs and a permanent IRO role to replace an IRO who will be retiring in June 2022. Otherwise we are fully staffed by permanent IROs.

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. The service is predominantly staffed by females, However, we remain a relatively diverse team with IROs of different ethnicity and nationality.

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 and recruitment fayre's.

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.

IROs also attend working parties to develop the service, this includes but is not exhaustive to developing the Mockingbird Model and developing the Family Time model.

Additionally, some IROs are completing their Practice Educator Award to support students 'long arm' in Social Care teams.

2.2 What's changed within the last twelve months

In the last twelve months there was the recruitment of a second Service Manager. Originally the role of the Service Manager had oversight of Child Protection Coordinator's, Independent Reviewing Officers, Foster Care Independent Reviewing Officers, Quality Assurance Managers (Reg 44), Local Authority Designated Officers (LADO), Participation service and a Business Support Team. From September 2021, a second Service Manager role was created and the service was divided. IROs, FIROs, Participation service and Quality Assurance Managers (Reg 44) remaining under one Service Manager, who works closely with the other Service Manager overseeing the other half of the service.

There has been robust recruitment improving stability and permanency across the workforce. The only outstanding roles that need to be recruited to are the newly

created Fixed Term contracts and a projected permanent post due to be vacant by virtue of retirement. This is underway, and will mean that there are no agency staff in the IRO service.

Whilst, for a significant length of time, over the course of 2021/2022, IROs have worked virtually due to Covid restrictions there has been increased face-to-face consultations with children and young people and meetings being either face-to-face, virtual or a hybrid model. This has been aligned to the choice of children and young people and room availability as Covid restrictions change within schools and other settings.

There has been the development of an informal challenge recording mechanism to ensure that there is transparency in the activity of the IRO; whilst there is a formal challenge and resolution process, the IRO should initiate informal challenge as the starting point unless the severity of the issue dictates more formal processes.

Alongside this there is an external partner challenge recording mechanism so it can be clearly identified where the IRO has directed the challenge, and there is a clear narrative of the outcome.

We have developed a child/young person feedback form to ensure we listen to children and young people's views about the review process and respond as appropriate to any changes we can make to improve the Child in Care review process.

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.

The closing of cases of children and young people are now overseen by the IRO Team Managers, providing improved oversight that the salient issues have been 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

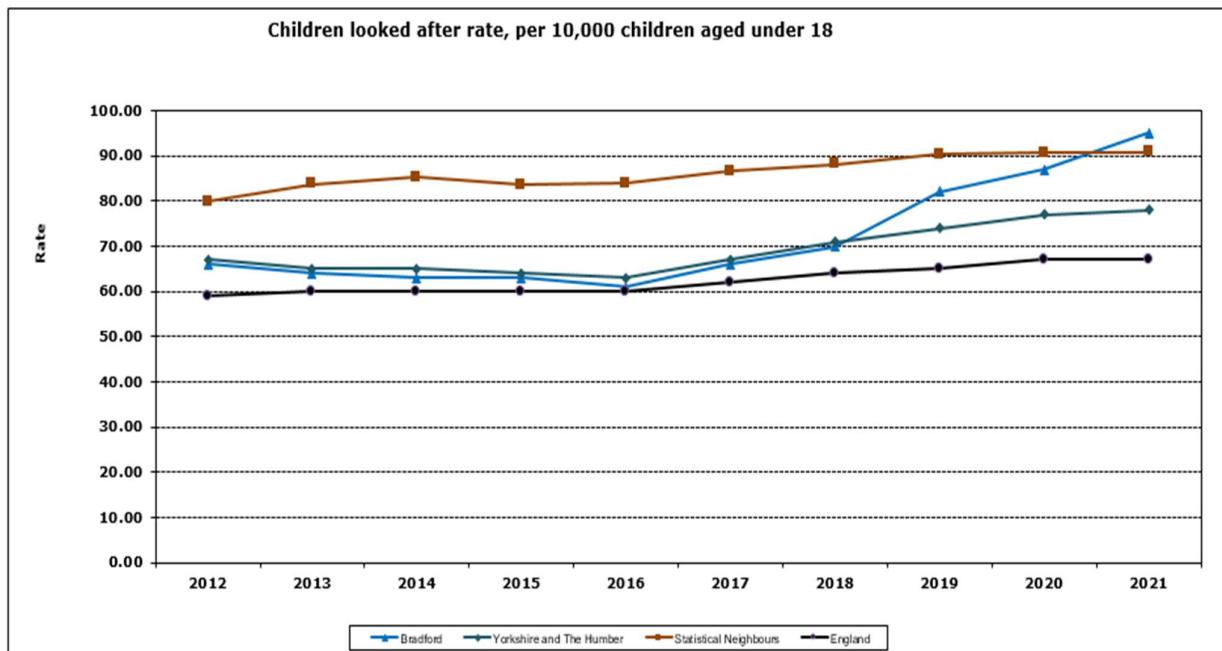
From April 2021 to March 2022, 481 children and young people entered care and 382 left care. For April 2020 to March 2021, 509 children and young people entered care and 405 left care. This is a decrease of 5.5% in children entering care and 5.6% decrease in children leaving care.

The last two years have seen a decrease in the volumes of children entering and leaving care. The latter is attributed to delays in Court timetabling for discharges of Care Orders but also Bradford has been impacted by staff retention which has caused drift and delay in progressing plans.

3.1 Number of Children in Care

On 31st March 2022 there were 1446 children and young people in care in Bradford, compared to 1352 in 2021 and 1246 in 2020. In the last year this is a 6.9% increase and over the last two years a 16% increase.

Since 2018 Bradford consistently has a higher rate of children in care per 10,000 children compared to Yorkshire and Humber and England. Over the course of 2020/2021 the data produced by the Department of Education cites that the rise in Bradford rates increased above its statistical neighbours.



Children entering care

Table 1

	2019	2020	2021	Changes from previous year
Bradford	35.00	36.00	35.00	1.00
Yorkshire and The Humber	27.00	28.00	27.00	-2.00
Statistical neighbours	31.60	28.90	27.30	-1.60
England	27.00	26.00	24.00	-2.00

The data in Table 1 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.

In 2020 the rates peaked at 36, whilst in 2021 the figures slightly reduced to 35; this continued to be significantly higher than Yorkshire and the Humber, England and Bradford's statistical neighbours. Bradford's Improvement Journey has been protracted by the impact of Covid. Bradford has also struggled with staff retention and the impact of organisational restructures resulting in delays in care planning. This has impacted on early support i.e. Early Help and succinct planning at Child in Need and Child Protection stages, which affects the numbers of children and young people entering care. These factors are well documented in the Children's Commissioner Report to the Secretary of State for Education January 2022.

Children leaving care

Table 2

	2019	2020	2021	Changes from previous year
Bradford	23.00	30.00	28.00	-2.00
Yorkshire and The Humber	24.00	26.00	25.00	-1.00
Statistical neighbours	29.30	27.90	26.50	-1.00
England	25.00	25.00	23.00	-2.00

Comparing the data of children and young people entering care to those leaving care, a greater rate of children have left care in Bradford in 2021 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 will help to achieve permanency for children.

However, in 2021 Bradford (alongside England) evidenced a more significant downturn in children and young people leaving care, which has a detrimental impact on the overall numbers of children in care given the numbers of children and young people who enter care in Bradford.

Ultimately, Bradford, compared to Yorkshire & Humber, England and statistical neighbours, has high levels of children and young people in care. Bradford is a deprived city, which has a significant percentage of children living in low income household affected by high unemployment. It is the fifth largest metropolitan district with an ethnically diverse and young population. These are all factors that increase the

challenges for Bradford to provide the range of services that are required to support such a complex population.

3.2 Children who entered Care by Legal Orders

The data relating to the legal order by which a child/young person entered care over 2021/2022 is highlighted in Table 3.

Over the course of 2021/2022 there have been a number of audits and discussions that have taken place in regard to the use of Police Powers of Protection¹. Whilst there has been a decrease in the figures since 2019/2020 there is an on-going debate that the numbers of children and young people entering care via this route is high and whether or not there is a disparity in threshold between the Police and Social Care and/or whether or not planned intervention should have been taken earlier. It is promising that there is a reduction in the use of Police Powers of Protection which evidences that this dialogue is between partner agencies is having some impact.

The use of Section 20 remains the most used legal route. This is due to Section 20 being used as a pre-cursor to the onset of legal proceedings through the use of the Public Law Pre Proceedings process (when there is agreement between Social Care and the parents with the commitment that Care Proceedings will be applied for) and when managing young people through the homeless route or separated migrant route.

There is still a cohort of children and young people who enter care through the legal order of ICO Section 38.6; which is where the Court directs the children remain where they currently live subject to an assessment. This is due to the Court agreeing to the threshold for an Interim Care Order (ICO) but not the threshold for immediate removal of the child/young person. It can be argued that Social Care did not submit sufficient evidence to warrant immediate removal. This can present itself in cases of long term neglect where there can be long term involvement by Social Care across the spectrum of Child in Need and Child Protection planning. In these instances, the issue of risk can peak and trough but cumulatively over the years can significantly reduce the 'life chances' of children and young people. Given that Bradford is a deprived city a number of families are exposed to the difficulties caused by poverty.

Table 3

Legal Order	2020 -2021	2021 -2022
Accommodated Section 20	236	214
Interim Care Order	184	193

¹ powers held by police officers to protect a child from harm if they believe there is an imminent danger. This includes, but is not limited to, **the power to remove a child from the family home without a court order and to temporarily house them in a 'place of safety'**.

Police Powers of Protection	77	57
Other	12	17
Total	509	481

3.3 Child in Care by Legal Status

The data relating to the legal orders that a child/young person were subject to on 31st March 2022 is highlighted in Table 4.

The figures for legal orders as an overall picture at the end of March 2022 evidences a significant increase in the use of ICO Section 38.6 orders. Whilst overall the numbers of children and young people entering care via this legal route decreased in 2021/2022 the residue of children and young people subject to this legal order remains high. This is affected by protracted Court Hearings, which are a result of specialist assessments, independent social work assessments, international elements and drift and delay caused by changes in social worker. Additionally, the IRO service routinely advises social care teams to amend legal orders on the child's file when the legal order has changed through the care proceedings, therefore there will be some anomalies in the data reporting as some children and young people will have crossed the threshold for removal during the care proceedings and the legal status has not been amended. It is generally the case that large sibling groups are made subject to ICO Section 38.6; so whilst the numbers are high the number of families this actually correlates to is smaller.

The data for adoption is positive in Bradford; Bradford is able to evidence that they have secured Placement Orders on an ever increasing narrative which is linked to early intervention, thorough assessment and clear planning. The partnership arrangements between Bradford and One Adoption West Yorkshire are good with their inclusion in Legal Gateway Panel to identify any earlier indicators for Early Permanence.

Section 20 has increased which is linked to Government rotation for Separated Migrants as well as Bradford's oversight in managing the Homeless route, with a new protocol being introduced in 2021/2022.

Whilst respite has continued to decrease, this does not directly link to a lack of respite provision for children and young people across Bradford, merely that the respite offered is not for more than 75 nights which then requires an IROs oversight thus being quantifiable in our data.

Table 4

Legal Status	31/03/2021	31/03/2022	Differential
Care Order S31.1(A) CA 1989	845	920	8.87% increase

Interim Care Order S38 CA 1989	281	245	12.8% decrease
Placement Order	86	92	6.97% increase
Remand Or Committed For Trial Or Sentence	2	5	150% increase
S20 - Series of Placements >75 nights per year or multiple providers	3	2	33% decrease
S20 - Single Placement	111	131	18% increase
Section 38.6 Interim Care Order	24	51	122% increase
Total	1352	1446	

3.4 Placement type for Children in Care

The data relating to the placement type that a child/young person was subject to for 2021/2022 is highlighted in Table 5.

The use of mother and baby units has remained static over the last year. There are occasions when a mother and baby unit is appropriate, but the decision to use a mother and baby unit should not be taken lightly as the assessment is for 12 weeks and is in a highly protected environment and does not necessarily allow for the full assessment of external (community based) risks. Mother and baby units are very useful when assessing whether a mother and/or father can care for a baby and their level of commitment over an extended period of time as well as providing time for some intense 'direct work' around any prevailing worries but perhaps are not as effective in being able to assess the impact of deeply entrenched behaviours resulting from (for example) domestic abuse or drug abuse where there is a need to assess a parent in the realities of life within the community.

There has been a 6% increase of children in care currently living with connected carers which indicates that the social work teams are actively identifying family options. This is opposed to a 1% increase in the use of 'mainstream' foster placements; therefore, in determining the shape of fostering services the use of Connected Carers is growing at a faster rate albeit that 'mainstream' foster placements are still the most significant type of placement used.

The use of Residential placements has increased by 21.8%, and an increase of 30% of Post 16 semi-independent homes (currently not regulated by Ofsted). Bradford's in-house residential services have been faced with challenges over 2021/2022; over the course of the year placements have reduced with the view to enable an overhaul on how children and young people are matched to Homes as well as development of a strategic plan for the future provision of Residential services. Alongside a national shortage of foster placements for children there has been an increased use of independent Residential Homes and Post 16 provision.

Bradford still has a significant number of children placed at home with a parent or parents. Whilst the comparison between 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 is marginal at 1.8% increase it is still an area that needs focus by Bradford in the future. Placement with a parent can often be decided at the conclusion of care proceedings as a means of providing a further period of testing when the reduced risk of significant harm can be maintained. Placement with parents can also be assessed as the right route for a child young person as they grow and develop into young adults. However, a child or young person placed at home with a parent should be a short lived care plan. Bradford needs to make inroads into the length of time placement with parent's plans are lasting.

- a) 1.2% of placement with parents are 6 years' old
- b) 7% of placements are 5 years' old
- c) 3.6% of placements are 4 years' old
- d) 4.2% of placements are 3 years' old
- e) 16% of placements are 2 years' old
- f) 12% of placements are 1-year-old

Where a young person has communicated that they do not want their Care Order discharged, despite living with a parent, their views and wishes are listened to by the IRO. There can be many factors for this particularly around the level of support they will or won't be entitled to without the security of shared parental responsibility and the desire to maintain a social worker to oversee their future.

IROs have and need to continue to evidence robust oversight and use the challenge and resolution process as appropriate. Delays have been caused by children and young people transferring services (i.e. from children and families to child in care teams or care leavers service) as well as the impact of changes of social workers caused by staff retention. Social workers need to ensure that there is a robust step down plan to enable the Court to support the discharge of the Care Order.

More recently, there has been the creation of two dedicated social workers to focus on discharges of Care Orders to support the reduction of children and young people in care, that do not require a legal order.

Bradford adoption data is extremely positive. In 2021 there was a 45% increase in children being placed into their adoptive home which is evidence of good working

relationships between One Adoption and Bradford Children's Services. To facilitate adoption planning communication and written documentation is required to be clear and transparent. Matching children to adoptive placements requires a lot of support from partner agencies and social workers need to be focused. Children who are placed for adoption tend to be the younger end, therefore ensuring permanency is achieved swiftly is essential.

Table 5

Placement type	Number 2020/2021	Number 2021/2022
Foster Care	555	561
Connected Person	372	394
Placed for Adoption	35	51
Placed with Parents	163	166
Residential	119	145
Supported accommodation / Lodging	93	121
Mother and Baby Unit	5	5
Hospital	1	0
Remand	2	5

3.5 Age and Gender profile of Children entering Care

Table 6 outlines the data in regard to the gender profile of children and young people entering care.

Since entering care there are two young people who have been confirmed as identifying as trans². Gender identity has become an increasing factor when considering the care needs of young people. The IRO service is supporting identity issues, supporting young people to have time to consider their feelings; over the course of the next few years it is suspected that this data will increase.

The data has concluded for the last 2 years that more males than females enter care aged 17+ and correlating this data to those young people who enter care via the route of Section 20 it is generally accepted that this is due to more males entering care via the homeless or in particular the separated migrant route.

² A term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.

Whilst, on balance more males enter care than female's year on year, in 2021/22 the data for children entering care under the age of one year was on par.

Table 6

	31/03/2021			31.03.2022		
Age	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
0 - less than 1	42	57	99	43	44	87
1 – 4	43	39	82	34	41	75
5 - 10	57	69	126	53	52	105
11 - 16	92	71	163	78	84	162
17+	13	26	39	17	35	52
Total	247	262	509	225	256	481

3.6 Age Ceased Care

Table 7 outlines the data of the ages of children and young people leaving care. Children and young people can leave care through a variety of routes namely, adoption, Special Guardianship Orders, discharging a Care Order to no Order, an alternative Order being agreed at the conclusion of care proceedings (i.e. Child Arrangements Order) or ending Section 20 status by mutual agreement.

It has continued to be a theme in 2021/2022 that the data cites 17 year olds as being the highest number of young people ceasing care and this will mainly be due to turning 18 or through Section 20 status being ended.

The data supports that the younger children (aged 1-4) will achieve permanency outside of long term social care involvement; over half the children who entered care were able to leave care by means of adoption, SGO or reunification with a parent. However, children aged mid-range (5-10) are more likely to remain in care for longer periods whether this is placed with Connected Persons, mainstream foster carers, residential or placed with a parent. There are many reasons for this including the oversight of complex needs borne out of childhood trauma, the impact of social work retention and focus on moving care plans to achieve permanency outside of long term social care involvement and packages of support in place to achieve permanency outside of long term social care involvement

Table 7

Age Group	Number 2020/2021	Number 2021/2022
0 - less than 1	19	21
1 – 4	93	86
5-10	69	57
11 – 16	72	63
17+	150	155
Total	403	382

3.7 Reasons that Children Left Care

During the pandemic, there have been 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 permanence options listed below in 2020/21, in Table 8.

The ‘other’ option is used in unusual circumstances these include existing jurisdiction maintaining responsibility for the family or care proceedings transferring to another Local Authority, remand status’ ending and some are simply errors where a young person was made CiC (usually linked to large sibling groups where there is an older sibling who did not form part of the accommodation into care).

As highlighted earlier with this report the data for adoption is positive with a 56.6% increase in children being adopted in 2021/2022.

However, there has been a decrease in achieving permanence by SGOs. Some of this will be absorbed by using different Orders e.g. the use of Child Arrangement Orders which has increased in 2021/2022. There is an impact on achieving permanency through drift and delay caused by social work staff retention.

Table 8

Reason	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	%
Returned to parents	72	79	9.7% increase
Supervision Order	56	47	16% decrease
Independence (aged 18)	137	141	2.9% increase
Special Guardianship Order	60	46	23% decrease

Adopted	30	47	56.6% increase
Child Arrangements Order	7	11	57% increase
Other	41	11	73% decrease
Total	403	382	

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 needs are covered in the child in care review process. In addition, there has been some training organised by and delivered within the team on issues affecting Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) children in care as reflective practice is the best way to ensure that IROs continue to prioritise the importance of considering ethnicity factors that affect children in care.

Table 9 evidences the diversity of children and young people looked after in Bradford. Whilst the highest ethnicity group is White British, there is a wide representation of other ethnicities that requires IROs to be alert to identity needs and ensure they maintain an up to date knowledge base and have a proactive oversight.

Table 9

Ethnic Group	31/03/2022
Asian/British Asian – Bangladesh	16
Asian/British Asian – Indian	2
Asian/British Asian - Other	22
Asian/British Asian - Pakistani	129
Black/Black British - African	39
Black British / other	2
Chinese	2
Gypsy/Roma	59
Information Not Yet Obtained	18
Mixed - Other	30

Mixed - White/Asian	127
Mixed - White/Black African	19
Mixed - White/Black Caribbean	55
Other Ethnic Group	30
Refused	0
Roma	18
Traveller of Irish Heritage	3
White - British	789
White - Central European	1
White - Eastern European	68
White - Irish	2
White – Other	15

3.9 Number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (UASC) – Separated Migrant Children and Young People

Table 10 evidences the ethnicity of Bradford's Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (Separated Migrant children and young people).

The data reporting follows the Department of Health criteria therefore it can be difficult to quantify the true data around ethnicity, as the ethnicities that arrive via the route of separated migrant do not fall under the categories, therefore are recorded as 'other ethnic group'. Additionally, the data recorded evidences that recording of ethnicity is not accurate as by definition of being a separated migrant you would not have an ethnicity that inferred any British element.

Further analysis of the information under the categories of 'other ethnic group' or 'Information Not Yet Obtained' identifies that a large number of Separated Migrant children have travelled from Kurdish speaking countries (i.e. Iraq, Iran, Syria).

Other areas include travel from the Middle East, Sudan and Eritrea.

Numbers have increased in 2021/2022 due to the National Transfer scheme Protocol for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children³ and the volumes of separated migrant children and young people entering England. This has placed additional pressure on the Care Leavers service at times as they oversee the transition of Separated Migrant children and young people to Bradford. In 2021/2022 the Care Leavers service updated their protocol for separated migrant children to improve overall care planning for this cohort of children and young people.

Table 10

Ethnicity	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022
Asian/British Asian - Other	3	8
Asian/British Asian - Pakistani	1	1
Black/Black British - African		5
Information Not Yet Obtained		2
Mixed - Other		1
Other Ethnic Group	13	34

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

Table 11 evidences the numbers of children and young people who were on child protection plans prior to entering care. There has been a 14% decrease on the numbers of children and young people entering care whilst being subject to a child protection plan. However, 44.6% of children and young people who enter care have been subject to a child protection plan at the point they entered care.

In 2019/2021 49% of children and young people were subject to a child protection plan at the point they entered care. Whilst the figure has come down in 2021/2022, there are still a significant number of children and young people who convert from child protection to child in care.

There is further work to be undertaken to improve outcomes within child protection processes to reduce the numbers of children and young people entering care in Bradford.

Table 11

2020-2021	2021-2022
30/04/2020	11

³ 'The National Transfer Scheme (NTS) protocol for unaccompanied asylum seeking children has been created to enable the safe transfer of unaccompanied children in the UK from one local authority (the entry authority from which the unaccompanied child transfers) to another local authority (the receiving authority). Only unaccompanied children that meet the definition of a UASC, are eligible to be referred to the NTS. (National Transfer Scheme Protocol for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. Transfers should take place within 10 working days of referral to the NTS: Dec 2021)

31/05/2020	10	31/05/2021	12
30/06/2020	15	30/06/2021	21
31/07/2020	69	31/07/2021	25
31/08/2020	41	31/08/2021	13
30/09/2020	23	30/09/2021	21
31/10/2020	17	31/10/2021	17
30/11/2020	9	30/11/2021	11
31/12/2020	17	31/12/2021	16
31/01/2021	14	31/01/2022	19
28/02/2021	10	28/02/2022	12
31/03/2021	14	31/03/2022	31
Total	250	Total	215

4 Performance data from the IRO Service

IRO caseloads have been between 80 – 90 per FTE for the last financial year. Caseloads remain higher than the recommendations set out within the IRO handbook; this is inevitable in light of the ever increasing population of children and young people in care but has been supported by the creation of 3 Fixed term 2 year contracts.

Additionally, through supervision, there continues to be a targeted discussion and challenge around cases to ensure that the IROs drive permanency across Bradford. Bradford remains on an Improvement Journey following its Ofsted inspection in 2018; the challenges for the social work teams continue to be the ability to retain staff and recruit staff. The IRO service continues to have a significant part to play in ensuring that care planning remains on track and permanency is achieved as soon as possible.

A total of 3560 Child in Care reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending 31st March 2021. This is compared to 3578 in the year 2020/21. This is a 0.5% decrease. The volume of reviews completed remains relatively static.

The service has continued to ensure a high percentage of reviews take place on time; 97.8% of reviews were completed on time compared with 97.3% in 2020/2021. The service has set an aspirational figure of 98%. It is positive that performance in this area has remained stable over the last few years despite the challenges of rearranging

reviews due to social work changes and a transfer of cases to permanent IROs through recruitment.

5 Child Participation

The importance of a child or young person's participation in the decision making processes of their lives is now a well-accepted concept embedded in recent legislation, government regulations and guidelines. The Department of Education gathers data on participation based on PN codes as outlined in Table 12. The IRO is expected to ascertain the views of child or young person prior to each review and to achieve this should have multiple resources. These can include (but are not exhaustive to) visits, using viewpoint⁴, WhatsApp, advocates, communication aids, interpreters, letters and messaging. How a child and young person wants to participate in their review and to what level is considered on a person to person basis by the IRO.

The use of PN7 has increased in the last year. When analysing the data, the general discrepancies come during the transition of aged 3 and 4. When a child is under 4 there is PN code 0 (child under 4), which means that mitigates the use of consultation; but aged 4 and onwards the option of using viewpoint and other techniques as a means to communicate views and /or be offered consultation via other means becomes available.

IROs are encouraged to observe children of the younger age range so that they can formulate an overall picture of how settled they are. From a service perspective there needs to be improvement in ensuring the participation of children at this age as well as confirmation that the log-in details of viewpoint have been shared when a child turns 4 to enable a practitioner to access viewpoint.

There have also been refusals to speak with the IRO or access an advocate or use alternative means to provide views for the child in care process with those aged 4 and above. It is important that this is also evidenced. Whilst others who have day-to-day oversight of young people in care could offer their interpretation of how the young person views their care plan, IROs are encouraged to evidence integrity in the information they report on.

Additionally, human error also accounts for some of the data, as views have clearly been sought and evidenced but there is inaccuracy in the data recorded.

There is a significant increase in PN5 and this is largely around the use of different platforms by the IRO to obtain the views of children and young people. This is a developing theme as children and young people appreciate communication with an IRO via a variety of means rather than the only option being face-to-face consultation.

⁴ Viewpoint is the current commissioned service to support children and young people participate in their child in care review process.

Table 12

Participation Code	2020- 2021	
PN0 – child under 4	784	721
PN1 – Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself	897	771
PN2 – Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf. Child's views represented by advocate or independent reviewing officer (IRO)	14	20
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	0	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)	5	38
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	447	905
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	1410	1064
PN7 – Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	19	34

6 IRO Quality Assurance and Making a Difference

Bradford IRO service continue to exercise the Challenge and Resolution process involving Stage 1, 2, and 3 evident on the child's file; with oversight through the management structure and clear timeframes for responses. However, prior to formal processes being initiated the IRO uses the informal challenge, whereby they seek to

ensure resolution to issues that are impacting the child through negotiation with either the Social Worker, Team Manager or at times the Service Manager.

The recording of the informal challenge is now explicit on the child/young person's file. This was implemented on 11th March 2022 and next year's Annual report will be able to provide data on the volumes of informal challenge activity by the IRO service. However, in the short timeframe that the reporting has been available 33 informal challenges were made by IROs. Examples include follow up on agreed recommendations following a mid-way check on the file, updating care plans, advocating for children and young people on consistency of social worker allocation and communication around family time.

Table 13 evidences the data in regard to the volumes of Stage 1, 2 and 3 Challenges initiated by IROs in 2021/2022

Stage 1 challenges increased by 23% and Stage 2 challenges increased by 54%. There were no Stage 3 challenges in 2020/2021.

Table 13

Stage of Challenge	Number of Challenges	Immediately escalated after stage 1	Resolved at stage 1
Challenge stage 1	252	16	236
Challenge stage 2	48		
Challenge stage 3	2		

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.

Whilst there have been no escalations to CAFCASS, the IRO service does alert the Deputy and Assistant Director and at times the Director if there are specific issues to be resolved at a strategic level or awareness to a specific area risk to ensure transparency in communication.

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 in Table 14.

Table 14

Theme	Reason why Challenge and Resolution process was started	% difference from 2020/2021
Care Plan not being updated / poor quality	69	32.6% increase
Drift and Delay in care planning	114	52% increase
Assessments not being updated /poor quality	64	14% increase
Poor Preparation for the Child in Care review	49	25% decrease
Review Recommendations not being followed up	85	85% increase
IRO not being notified of significant changes	5	50% decrease
Lack of information sharing	25	38% increase
Social Work visits to children not being undertaken within statutory timeframe	15	275% increase
New risks not being assessed	15	200% increase
Insufficient evidence of the child's voice	14	250% increase
Insufficient evidence of parent / carer views	3	200% increase
Case Management oversight	46	48% increase
Other	29	81% increase

The challenge and resolution process has seen an increase in 2021/2022 which is contributed to IROs embedding their mid-way check process and having greater oversight and awareness of any drift and delay in care planning at an earlier stage. It is also indicative of the staff retention that Bradford has faced in terms of social workers and the impact this has on care planning.

Oversight on the challenge and resolution process is supported by quarterly reports to the Heads of Service providing a breakdown of the reasons why challenges are made by the IROs service so that themes can be identified and addressed. These quarterly reports also identify themes of children and young people entering care so that this

can be reviewed. Examples being the use of Police Powers of Protection, young people entering care via the homeless route etc. If there are certain cohorts of children and young people entering care over a given timeframe, then this can lead to auditing around the specific theme so that any trends can be identified and acted upon as required.

The challenge and resolution process is embedded within the casefile recording system; 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. Since this process has been activated there have been 4 partner agency challenges. These have all been related to Education.

Education provision has been a theme in Bradford, therefore it would have been expected that more partner agency challenges were detailed specifically on children and young people's records. The themes are associated to part time education plans, EHCPs being updated and a general view that education should be striving to be more aspirational for Bradford's looked after children.

Additionally, the ability for children and young people to be able to access CAMHs in a timely manner, whether this is for therapeutic support or assessments in relation to ADHD or Autism, is often an area that IROs raise, therefore it would have expected that more partner agency challenges in regard to this had been issued.

IROs continue to complete audits on children's files to provide overview in addition to the mid-way checks and challenge process. This remains an area for development within the IRO service. Currently IROs workload is impacted by high caseloads and managing oversight on care planning.

261 audits were completed in 2021 – 2022, which is a further fall since the audit numbers in 2021 – 202. 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.

6.1 Feedback from Children and Families and other agencies

The IRO service has received a number of compliments over 2021-2022. The following are a few examples -

As I am sure you are aware the SGO was granted yesterday. Myself and X just wanted to send you one last email thanking you for everything you have done.

Thank you so much for all your assistance.

When you were first appointed as the IRO myself and X had reservations because it was another change and we felt like we were going to be starting again, but how wrong we were!

You being appointed as the IRO turned out to be the best.

We have really enjoyed working alongside you and who knows we may work together again in the future as we are still active foster carers.

Most importantly we want to thank you for caring, you listened. We wish you all the best for the future.” [received from foster carers]

CAFCASS staff feel the Bradford IROs provide them with excellent communication, updates and liaison and have good practice regarding challenge” [received from a CAFCASS]

Just want to keep you in the loop and would also like to say a big thank you. Xs mother felt really included in the CIC review and since this meeting her relationship with X has improved a lot, she is keeping in regular contact. X and X’s mother have also been supporting her with finding support from a solicitor. [feedback from a social worker following a Child in Care review]

“...felt the review was conducted very thoroughly and you challenged professionals. We felt supported at the review and felt we are working together and not against each other. Thanks for your support.” [feedback from a Social Worker]

“.. has been a great advocate and support for our UASC young people. He has brought such valuable knowledge of care planning for young people seeking asylum and their specific needs. ” [feedback from a social worker].

“I would also like to take this opportunity to say that whenever I see your name as the IRO for one of the families I am supporting, it does makes me smile. I feel that you are always approachable and accessible for families, carers and children, even when talking at times about really difficult things. It is clear you hold children and their wellbeing at the centre of every meeting I attend with you, ... It is clear you appreciate and understand the pressures felt in the current climate, and balance this really well with ensuring the children who we both support are happy, healthy and safe. [feedback from a social worker].

7 Developmental priorities for the next twelve months

Need	Action	Timeframe	By whom
Continue to maintain a stable and permanent workforce.	Supportive supervision on a monthly basis. High support and high challenge by IRO Team Managers to the IROs	Consistently over the year	Service manager and IRO Team Managers

	Seamless recruitment processes when there are identified future vacancies identified.		
Building on plans for a hybrid return to work strategy.	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 working with partner agencies to facilitate effective meetings.	To be discussed for each and every review	Team Managers and IROs
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.	Planning effective team meetings for reflective discussion Routine quality assurance during supervision Team Manager audits.	Monthly team meetings Monthly supervision	IROs and Team Managers
Promotion to evidence the use of challenge and resolution with partner agencies will be embedded into practice.	Routine quality assurance during supervision.	Monthly supervision	IRO Team Managers
Good quality mechanisms for child and young person participation in their child in care review.	Contribute to the tendering process for child and young person participation platform.	Conclude by September 2022	HoS and Service Manager
Reduce drift and delay in care planning	Robust supervision oversight on certain	Monthly supervision	IRO Team Managers

	<p>cohorts of care planning i.e. placed with parents.</p> <p>Consistency in mid-way check and dispute resolution.</p>	<p>Routine oversight and through Child in Care Reviews, mid-way checks and audits</p>	<p>Service Manager IROs</p>
Maintain positive working relationships with Social Care and Partner agencies	<p>Regular attendance at team meetings to discuss issues and share themes and practice.</p> <p>Proactive attendance at IRO team meetings by key partner agencies.</p>	<p>At least quarterly meetings</p> <p>Monthly Team meetings</p>	IRO Team Managers

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.
- Whilst we have developed a process to obtain feedback from children and young people in regard to the child in care review experience; responses are limited. Therefore, we need to ensure that the service promotes the use of feedback forms. Additionally, we need to undertake discussions with the participation service to enable further consultation on how we can improve the service.

Helen Cliffe

Service Manager

6 June 2022