

**Report for:**  
**ACTION/INFORMATION**

**Item Number:**

<b>Contains Confidential or Exempt Information</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>Title</b>	Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report April 2019 – March 2020
<b>Responsible Officer(s)</b>	Carolyn Fair – Director Children and Families
<b>Author(s)</b>	John Churchill, Head of Service Safeguarding, Review, & Quality Assurance Paul Andrews, Manager Safeguarding, Review & Quality Assurance
<b>Portfolio(s)</b>	Cllr Yvonne Johnson
<b>For Consideration By</b>	Corporate Parent Committee
<b>Date to be Considered</b>	10 <sup>th</sup> December 2020
<b>Implementation Date if Not Called In</b>	
<b>Affected Wards</b>	None
<b>Keywords/Index</b>	Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report April 2019 – March 2020

**Purpose of Report:**

The purpose of this report is to provide the committee with the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) Annual Report from April 2019-March 2020.

**1. Recommendations**

Members are invited to note this report.

**2. Reason for Decision and Options Considered**

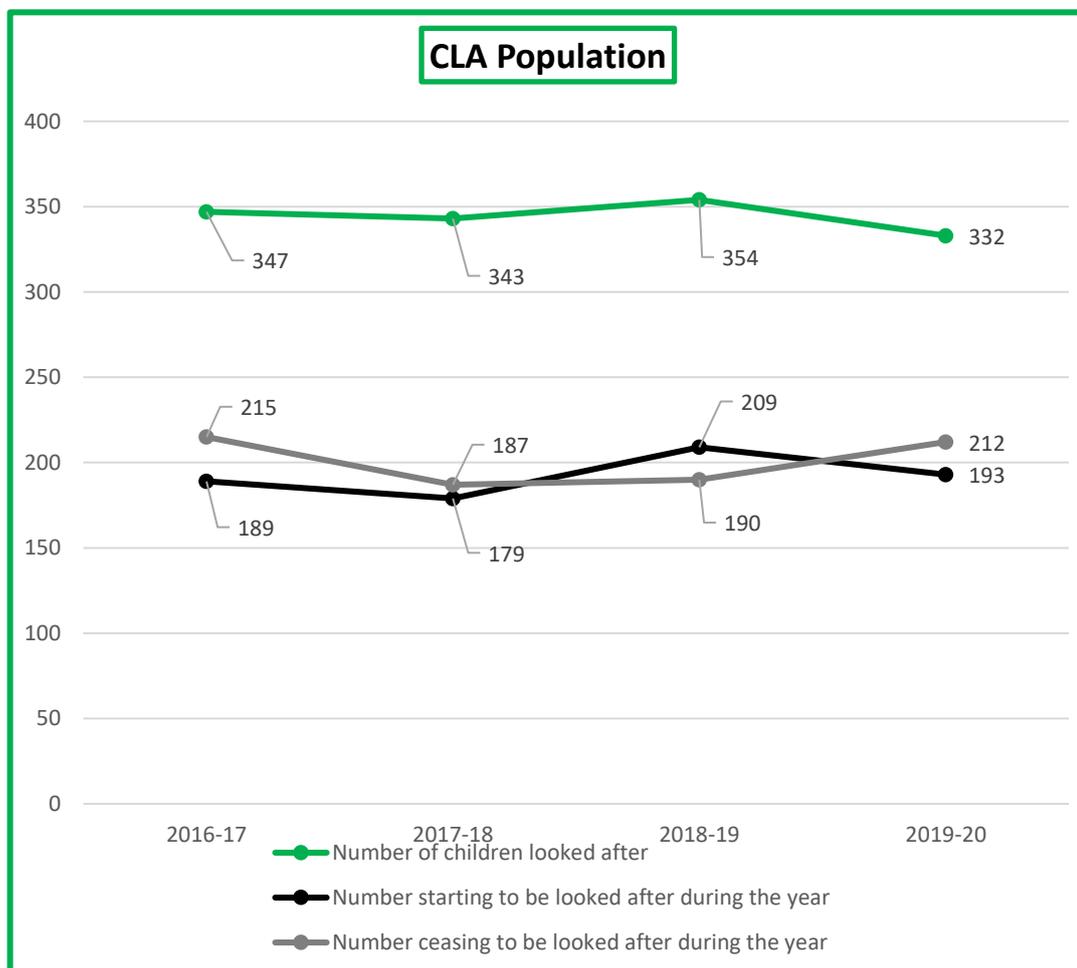
This report updates members on the activity and progress of the service provided by the Independent Reviewing Officers, a service commissioned through Aidhour, an external provider.

### 3. Key Implications

#### Numbers of looked after children

At the end of the reporting year (April 2019 – March 2020) there were 332 looked-after children and young people who were receiving provisions of support from the LB Ealing.

CLA Numbers Overview	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Number of children looked after	347	343	354	332
Number starting to be looked after during the year	189	179	209	193
Number ceasing to be looked after during the year	215	187	190	212



In comparison to 2018-19, the number of looked after children within the LB Ealing has decreased from 354 to 332. In 2018-2019, looked after young people between the ages 16 and 17-years-of age contributed to 34% (or 122 young people) of our CLA population – our second largest demographical cohort. As some of the young people within this cohort will have transitioned into adulthood, the current reduction in our overall CLA population is suggestively attributed to the aforementioned. When delving further into the data reflecting children and young people who have ceased to be looked after from 2019-20, 38% of this cohort (or 81 young people) had their CLA status ended as result of them transitioning into adulthood.

Most notably, the largest cohort of children and young people who have ceased being looked after in 2019-20 – 42% or 89 children and young people – are reflected to have returned to their primary carers or placed with alternative kinship carers. This figure is quite interesting when considering that 42% of young people in Ealing have become looked after by way of an issuance of an Interim Care Order (ICO - S.38) – 13% (43 children/young people) or through a single period of voluntary accommodation (S.20) – 29% (97). Of note, there was a 22% reduction in the number of ICOs issued in 2019-20 and a 6% increase in the number of FCOs issued.

These figures suggest that looked after arrangements for many of our children and young people were time-limited, targeted interventions – with ultimate care/pathway plans that were reflective of familial reunification. 53% of our CLA population are the subjects of Full Care Orders (FCO - S.31) (175), 4% (14) are accommodated through the issuance of Placement Orders and only 1% (3), are reflective of young people who have been placed on remand whilst criminal investigations/proceedings are being undertaken.

When further reflecting on children and young people ceasing to be looked after in 2019-20 (212 children/young people in total), much of this cohort were only CLA for up to three months (71, or 33% of the population). The second largest cohort of children and young people who ceased being looked after in 2019-20 were accommodated for over 24 months (47, 22%) – most suggestively, young people who had recently transitioned into adulthood. Children and young people who ceased being looked after – after six to 12 months – made-up the third largest cohort (40, 19%). With those whose look after status ended after 12 to 24 months (37, 18%) and three to six months (17, 8%) representing the lowest cohorts.

When comparing these figures to those collected in 2018-19, the most notable statistical change can be seen when reflecting upon the number of children and young people who ceased to be looked after – after three months. As aforementioned, in 2019 – 33% or 71 children/young people were reflected in this group – which is a marked increase when compared to last year's figures of 28% or 54, respectively.

This data also suggests that a larger number of children/young people became looked after and were subsequently discharged after a brief period of accommodation (one to three months), than what was reflected in 2018-19 – despite our overall CLA population being lower in 2019-20 (332) than the previous year (354). When this data is considered in concert with the reduction

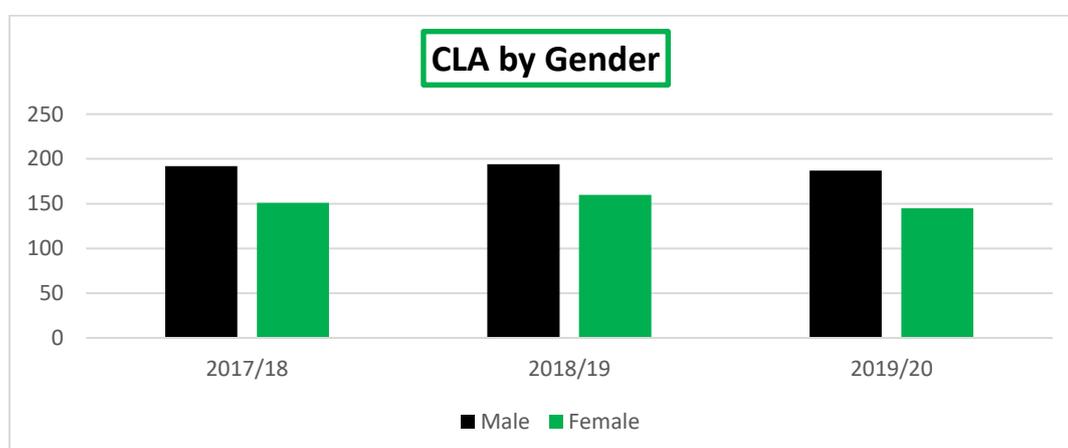
of children and young people accommodated through the issuance of an ICO in 2019-20 (down to 43 or 13%, when compared to 55, 16% in 2018-19), this suggests that there were either more parental reunifications/alternative kinship arrangements facilitated within one to three months of initial accommodation – outside of the court arena, fewer instances of court proceedings being initiated overall, or fewer instances of ICOs being granted to the local authority – upon initiating proceedings. This trend will require further exposition, as a reduction in the conversion rate of ICOs applied for and those granted would suggest issues with threshold application or court preparedness – both aspects of care planning that IROs should be independently overseeing.

### Profile of Ealing’s looked after population

Of the 332 looked after children 43 are Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) – down from the 55 UASC young people reflected last year. UASC young people in Ealing receive the same provision of support as other looked after children, accessing all the privileges that they are legally entitled to – including regular, independent oversight of their arrangements/plans by their respective IROs. When planning for looked after reviews, special consideration is given by Social Care and IROs to ensure that young people within this cohort are provided with opportunities to meaningfully contribute to their meetings – primarily facilitated through the procurement of interpreters or other provisions of support as necessitated by their needs.

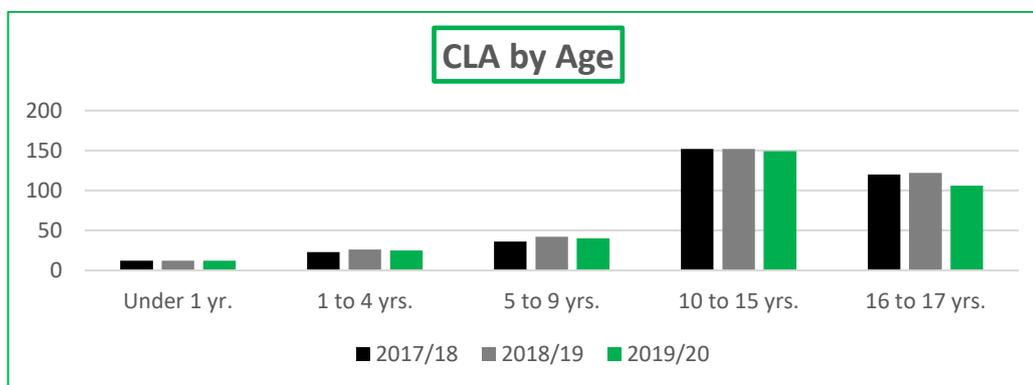
Of the 332 looked after children and young people in Ealing, 56% (187) are boys and 44% (145) are girls. This reflects a decrease of 4% for boys and a decrease of 9% for girls – in comparison to the previous year. Boys reflecting as a higher percentage of looked after children/young people than girls, has been a recurrent theme over the past three years.

CLA Gender	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Male	192 (56%)	194 (55%)	187 (56%)
Female	151 (44%)	160 (45%)	145 (44%)
Total	343	354	332



In what has also continued as a theme in 2019-20, the highest number of our looked after population are children and young people within the 10-15 age group (149 children, 45%). Similarly, to 2018-19, the second highest number of looked after young people are within the 16-17 age group, standing at 106 or 32% of the total population. Children aged five to nine made up 12% (40) of our CLA population, with youngsters aged one to four making up 8% (25), and small babies under a year old – making up only 4% (12). Given these figures, IROs are working collaboratively with Social Care to ensure that issues pertinent to our most representative age groups – contextual safeguarding themes (CCE, CSE, county lines etc.) – are identified and thoroughly embedded in their respective Care and Pathway Plans. Through targeted relationships with the CSE and Missing Persons Team – practical support is available to both Social Workers and IROs as a means of mitigating these risk factors.

CLA by Age Breakdown	2017/18	%	2018/19	%	2019/20	%
Under 1 yr.	12	3%	12	3%	12	4%
1 to 4 yrs.	23	7%	26	7%	25	7%
5 to 9 yrs.	36	10%	42	12%	40	12%
10 to 15 yrs.	152	44%	152	43%	149	45%
16 to 17 yrs.	120	35%	122	35%	106	32%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>332</b>	<b>100%</b>



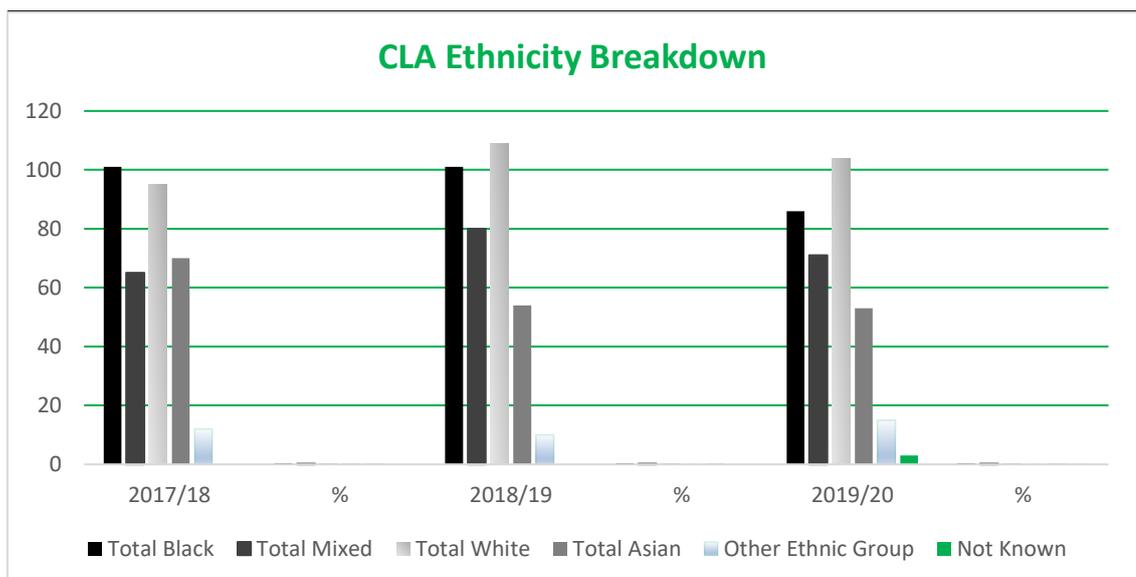
Over the past year, the number of Black children in local authority care decreased to 86 (26% of the total population) in comparison to last year, where these figures stood at 104 and 29%, respectively. The number of children who are classified as Dual or from Multiple Heritages has decreased from 76 to 71 children, however the percentage of the population that this cohort represents remains at 21%. White children and young people continue to be the most represented group in Ealing, despite there being a reduction in their overall numbers when compared to the previous year.

At present, there are 104 children who are classified as White in Ealing, but despite this, White children still reflect 31% of the looked after population. Following a similar trend as White, Black and Multi-heritage children in Ealing, the population of Asian children and young people has also decreased from 55 in 2018-19 to 53 in 2019-20. Asian children continue to account for 16% of Ealing's looked after population. There are currently 15 children who have been

classified as belonging to an “Other Ethnic Group” – accounting for 5% of all looked after children and young people. This group is more represented in 2019-20 than they were in 2018-19 where the figures were nine children/young people and 3% of the population. Finally, there has also been an increase in the number of children/young people whose ethnicities have been classified as Not Known/Not Asked. There are currently three children within this cohort – reflecting 1% of our total population. In 2018-19 – there were no young people classified as such, so it is highly likely that the young people within this cohort are reflective of missing data/data anomalies – which will need to be rectified.

The marked reduction of Black children in care is very interesting and will require further exposition by the Safeguarding, Review and Quality Assurance (SRQA) to unpack. It would be helpful to know what has precipitated this trend – have there been more parental reunifications within this cohort – as compared to others? Were Black children more proportionately represented in the 212 young people who ceased being looked after in 2019-20? Further exposition into this reduction will assist with identifying the provisions of support on offer, or the intervention methods implemented by Social Care, that have contributed to this theme.

CLA by Ethnicity	2017/18	%	2018/19	%	2019/20	%
Total Black	101	29%	101	29%	86	26%
Total Mixed	65	19%	80	23%	71	21%
Total White	95	28%	109	31%	104	31%
Total Asian	70	20%	54	15%	53	16%
Other Ethnic Group	12	4%	10	3%	15	5%
Not Known	0	0%	0	0%	3	1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>332</b>	<b>100%</b>



## **Key Placement Data**

33% of Ealing's looked after population, or 110 children and young people are placed with private or third-party sector provisions – such as private fostering agencies. 28% (92) of our children and young people are placed with in-house foster carers, with 14% (46) placed with relatives or friends, 9% (30) in hostels or other supportive residential settings, 6% (21) residing in hostels/homes that are subject to regulation, 3% (9) living independently, 3% (9) placed with their parents, 2% (5) placed for adoption, 1% (2) residing in residential care home, 1% (2) placed in a facility where they are receiving medical or nursing care and three young people who are currently on remand in a Youth Offending Institute or in Prison. Of note, there has been a 26% increase in the number of in-house foster placements, subsequently reducing our reliance on private and voluntary placements. 40% of Ealing's looked after children and young people are in their matched and linked, long-term placements.

38% (126) of Ealing's children and young people are placed within the local authority area, which is a percentage point match of last year's figure, even though there are nine fewer children within this cohort (135 – 2018-19) – in this reporting year. 40% (134) of our looked after population are placed outside of Ealing, but within greater-London. This is a slight percentage increase when considering last year's figure which stood at 38%. 22% (72) of our children and young people are placed outside of greater-London, which is two percentage points lower than the figures reported in 2018-2019 – 85 children, 24% of the population.

38% (125) of Ealing's children and young people are placed within Ealing and within 20 miles of their home addresses. 43% (142) are placed outside of Ealing and within 20 miles of their family home. 19% (65) are placed 20+ miles away from their home address and reside outside the local authority area.

Given the number of children and young people who are residing outside of the Ealing area, the IRO Service and key contacts from the Horizons Centre have been working in partnership to discuss ways in which children who are not placed within the local authority area can participate or feel more included in the wonderful activities that are being offered at the provision. Targeted discussions will continue in this regard and this will be a key component of the work that the IRO Service will be focusing on over the course of the year.

## **Participation Data**

As our children and young people are the most important stakeholders in their care experiences, it is of utmost importance that they and those closest to them are given opportunities to engage in the review process. Our IROs continue to have a responsibility to actively seek the views of our children and young people and encourage them to actively participate in their reviews. In the reporting year, 99% of our children and young people participated in their meetings. This figure reflects a recurrent positive trend as the figures for the previous year were 99% and 98% respectively.

## **IRO performance**

In the period between the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2019 and the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2020, there were 937 looked after reviews undertaken by our IROs. 934 of these reviews were convened within timescales, an impressive 99.7% compliance rate. This performance speaks to the ongoing commitment of our IROs to the children and young people they are accountable for.

In accordance with statutory expectations, initial reviews for children who have recently transitioned into local authority care or have had a placement change, are due to have their circumstances reviewed within 20 working days. Their second review conference should be convened within three months of the first, with all subsequent reviews convening within six-month intervals.

In addition to convening statutory looked after reviews, IROs are also expected to undertake Midway Reviews – which take inventory of a child and young person's circumstances and the progression of their Care/Pathway Plan in between statutory reviews. We can evidence that the number of Midway Reviews undertaken are increasing year on year. These Midway Reviews are integral aspects of the quality assurance process and there is improving evidence of IROs working to identify drift, delay and other issues that may be impacting upon service delivery.

## **IRO Challenge and Escalation**

An essential aspect of the IRO role is to independently critique, scrutinise and quality assure the provision of service that is being offered to children and young people. Ealing IROs, given their long-standing relationships with social workers and multitier managers are key assets to the local authority in instances where issues arise in relation to a child or young person's care/pathway plan, placement stability or suitability. Below are some examples of how IROs challenge when such problems emerge.

In January 2020 the Safeguarding Review and Quality Assurance (SRQA) Manager, in partnership with the Aidhour Operations Director drafted revised Issues Resolution Process (IRP) guidance, which clearly stipulates to IROs, Social Care colleagues, children/young people and all other stakeholders – what is expected of IROs when issues arise within the care planning process.

In addition to this, the revised IRP guidance also explicitly highlight the timescales for intervention as well as what escalation at each level looks like (including key involvements from managers and Senior Leaders). The purpose of this revised guidance is to ensure that purposeful challenge and escalation is appropriately chronicled by IROs, that interventions are expedited via a collaborative approach.

In addition to this, the SRQA Manager is working in partnership with the Mosaic Team to create a dedicated challenge workflow – ensuring that purposeful escalation is accurately reflected on the files of our children and young people.

At present, IRO challenge and escalation is currently aggregated on an internal spreadsheet which is disseminated to Senior Leaders for their information and oversight. In this reporting year, there have been 28 instances of formal challenge

issued. The timeliness of challenge resolution is an area of improvement for the service, but it is expected that the revised IRP guidance and the escalation workspace will lead to marked improvements in this regard.

Two children, both with significant levels of disability. Parents wanted to resume the care of both children and proposed to take the issue back to court. The IRO advocated for one of the children to remain in his foster placement and appropriate support to be offered to the parents around the care of the other child – thus preventing disruption and maximising the ability of the parents to care for the sibling whose life may be cut short at any time.

Child placed in long term foster care. Contact between the child and her parents had been managed by the foster carer and there was increasing evidence that arrangements were chaotic and damaging to the child. The IRO insisted and enabled the local authority to take back control of contact which has resulted in the child having more satisfactory contact with both of her parents.

An unaccompanied asylum-seeking young person presented with documentation from his country of origin that suggested that he was 15 years old. Despite this, the young person was determined by the Home Office to be older than his documents implied. As a result of this, the young person would be unable to attend the school that had been identified for him and his current foster placement, of which he had happily settled into, was now in jeopardy. Through persistent and strategic escalation from the young person's IRO in partnership with the allocated social work team, it was ultimately determined that the young person's details were genuine, and he was the age that he was claiming to be. At present, the young person continues to be settled in his placement and is doing very well at college.

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## **Strategic IRO Challenge**

### **May 2019**

Social Worker reports not being done on time for LAC Reviews raised with Heads of Service. IROs had conversations about Contextual Safeguarding, improvements have been made in both regards since these initial concerns were raised.

Issue with Semi-independent Accommodation providers and their provision of progress reports and their lack of input to LAC Reviews was raised with the Head

of Service for Commissioning, who agreed to propose / consult on an expectation that providers report “at least monthly” on young people’s progress and provide a report for each LAC Review meeting.

There was discussion of writing records of review meetings as letters to children. A revised template was issued on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2019.

### **August 2019**

In August 2019 the Aidhour Operations Director undertook an Audit of LAC Review Reports, Mid-Way Monitoring and IRO Footprint. The key findings from this involved identification of some excellent child-friendly, reasonably brief letters which still managed to cover all the required subheadings; there was good evidence of IROs pursuing drift and delay in care planning for some children; and where these were present, mid-point reviews generally showed good follow up around young people’s care plans. Areas for improvement included some cases where there wasn’t evidence of a review close to the mid-point between 6-month review meetings; on some cases the record was not child friendly, in particular, the way the child’s historical context and lived experiences were presented. More attention was needed to address triple planning and immunisations for asylum seeking children and better evidence of IRO contact with parents. These findings were conveyed to the IROs in September 2019 and more recent audits have shown improvements in these areas.

### **September 2019**

The Aidhour Contract Meeting heard of an issue with SW Reports for LAC Reviews not being on the system raised by the Aidhour Operations Director. Significant improvements were made in this regard due to invested steering from the Director of Children and Families.

### **November 2019**

This meeting followed the Ofsted graded inspection of the same month where informal feedback was given to the IROs. Difficulty in tracking disputes and escalations was identified. The meeting was joined by chairs of child protection conferences which was helpful in improving communication and understanding particularly around children who had been subject to child protection plans and then became looked after. There was also discussion about children’s communication via social media with their parents. The issue of tracking disputes has more recently been addressed through creation of a new escalation episode on MOSAIC.

### **March 2020**

Visit by the LAC Nurse. IROs suggested in relation to health assessments a preference for specific over generic recommendations, a need to couch “obesity” in more child friendly language, a need for follow up around orthodontic appointments which can slip if children move between placements. IROs thanked the LAC Nurse for the good quality conversations evident in LAC Health Assessments around sexual health. The need for IROs to promote the use of independent visitors was raised.

## **Quality assuring the quality assurers – the IRO Service’s response to the October 2019 ILACS inspection**

Upon the conclusion of the ILACS inspection, a multi-faceted IRO Action Plan was developed by the SQRA Manager and Aidhour Operations Director – aimed to address the areas of improvement that had been identified for our service, but also to critically reflect on the provision of service we are offering our children and young people. This action plan, made in consultation with the Head of the Fostering and Connect Team, the Head of Service from the Leaving Care Team and Horizon’s Centre & Aftercare Team Manager, is designed to ensure that our children and young people are at the very centre of our work and that their lived experiences, feelings and wishes are at the forefront of our thoughts and interventions for them.

We have set a plan that is realistic, achievable and proportionate to the needs of our children and young people. As an added quality assurance mechanism, the progression of the action plan will receive regular scrutiny from Senior Leaders in Improvement Boards – to ensure that identified barriers or themes are collaboratively addressed. Finally, this action plan will act as an addendum to this annual report and reflect our key priorities for 2020-21.

### **Internal quality assurance activity**

Through the LB Ealing’s internal audit spine, there is regular oversight of the effectiveness of IRO intervention and the timely progression of care and pathway plans. This audit spine consists of short-form, targeted audits, referred to as Health Checks as well as comprehensive and holistic audits – as well. The information gathered from this quality assurance activity is shared with IROs in group consultation session and in our bimonthly IRO Team Meetings.

In addition to this, the SRQA Manager and Aidhour Operations Director are also undertaking four audits per month, aimed at reviewing the purposefulness and timeliness of IRO challenge and escalation, the quality and frequency of midway reporting and the overall provisions of service we are offering to our children and young people. In this vein, the SRQA Manager and Aidhour Operations Director have created a bespoke audit tool that will assist with regularly capturing the information outlined above. At present, this bespoke audit tool has been sent to the borough’s Quality Assurance Officer for her thoughts and to ensure that it is consistent with our existing audit toolkits.

Finally, from July 2020, the SRQA Manager in partnership with the Aidhour Operations Director will be drafting quarterly audit reports that will capture key data about the functioning of the services (timeliness of reviews within the quarter, number of midway reviews undertaken and etc), as well as qualitative analysis of the provision of support that is being offered to our children and young people by the IRO service. The information garnered from these quarterly reports will be shared with Senior Leaders and discussed in subsequent Improvement Boards.

## **Complaints and advocacy support**

In this reporting year there has only been one complaint received in relation to the IRO Service. The complaint itself revolved around the perception that an IRO had raised his voice whilst engaged in a face-to-face consultation with a sibling group. This matter also had independent oversight from the LB Ealing's LADO as well. Ultimately, it was determined that there was nothing to suggest that the IRO had acted improperly and it was agreed that the Aidhour Operations Director would write to the young people involved – as a formal acknowledgement of their concerns. This matter was satisfactorily resolved, with the young people involved feeling empowered and listened to, and the IRO being absolved of suspicions of impropriety. Of note, this matter was reported, investigated (by the LB Ealing LADO) and resolved within 10 working days.

IROs continue to advise children and young people about the council's independent advocacy service – Coram Voice – and encourage them to make use of the provision. An advocate is arranged for a child or young person, upon request. In what has continued as a positive theme, advocacy requests are progressed appropriately and in a timely manner by Social Care.

### **4. Financial**

No financial implications.

### **5. Legal**

The appointment of an Independent Review Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. In March 2010, the government issued new statutory guidance for local authorities and IROs with respect to care planning and reviewing arrangements for looked-after-children as contained in Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and Statutory Guidance. This came into effect in April 2011.

The annual report is a compulsory management responsibility as set out in the IRO Handbook 2010, Chapter 7, Strategic and Management responsibilities which states (Section 7.11);

This IRO Annual Report has been produced by the Safeguarding, Review and Quality Assurance Service in-line with statutory guidance. This report will aim to analytically comment on the experiences of looked after children in Ealing, the quality and provision of service they have received between April 2019 and March 2020, and the role that IROs have played in achieving outcomes for them.

This report will:

- highlight key data and performance information, emerging themes and trends
- expound on the targeted IRO Action Plan – our service's response to the Ofsted ILACS Inspection 2019.
- set out our priorities for the next 12 months

The statutory duties of IROs are to:

- Monitor the local authority's performance and fulfilment of its functions and interventions for looked after children and young people.
- Facilitate and chair regular reviews of children and young people's Care and Pathway Plans, ensuring that these plans are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities.
- Ensure that the ascertainable wishes and feelings of young people (where appropriate) are given due consideration by Corporate Parents.

Upon fulfilling these duties, IROs have additional responsibilities such as:

- Promoting the voices of children and young people
- Ensuring that children and young people's Care and Pathway Plans are informed by up-to-date assessment, reflect their lived experiences, and defensibly and proportionately respond to their identified needs
- Identifying any drift or delay themes that have impacted upon service delivery
- Empowering young people to be independent stakeholders in their experiences – through the use of advocacy services
- Monitoring the activity and interventions undertaken by the Corporate Parent to ensure that their proposed plans for children and young people are fully understood (where possible) by them, and those closest to them.
- Taking appropriate and expeditious action should the local authority, in the capacity of Corporate Parent, fail to comply with regulations or breaches its legal responsibilities to children and young people – including referring matters to the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS)

**6. Value For Money**

N/A.

**7. Sustainability Impact Appraisal**

N/A.

**8. Risk Management**

N/A.

**9. Community Safety**

N/A.

**10. Links to the 3 Key Priorities for the Borough**

N/A.

**11. Equalities, Human Rights and Community Cohesion**

Equality Impact is consistently reviewed and evaluated in terms of service delivery.

**12. Staffing/Workforce and Accommodation implications**

N/A.

**13. Property and Assets**

N/A.

**14. Any other implications**

N/A.

**15. Consultation**

N/A.

**16. Timetable for Implementation**

N/A.

**17. Appendices**

**18. Background Information**

N/A.

**Consultation (Mandatory)**

<b>Name of consultee</b>	<b>Post held</b>	<b>Date sent to consultee</b>	<b>Date response received</b>	<b>Comments appear in paragraph:</b>
<b>Internal</b>				
Cllr Johnson	Portfolio holder Children's	3/9/20		
Carolyn Fair	Director Children and Families	26/11/20		
<b>External</b>				

**Report History**

<b>Decision type:</b>	<b>Urgency item?</b>
<b>EITHER:</b> Key decision <b>OR</b> Non-key decision <b>OR</b> For information (delete as applicable)	<b>Yes / No (delete as applicable)</b> [Is it a general or special urgency key decision, which was not included in the Forward Plan with at least one month's notice ?] If yes, set out the reasons both why the item was not included and why a decision cannot be deferred.
Report no.:	John Churchill and Paul Andrews John Churchill, Head of Service Safeguarding, Review, & Quality Assurance Paul Andrews, Manager Safeguarding, Review & Quality Assurance Head of Service Leaving Care /HST