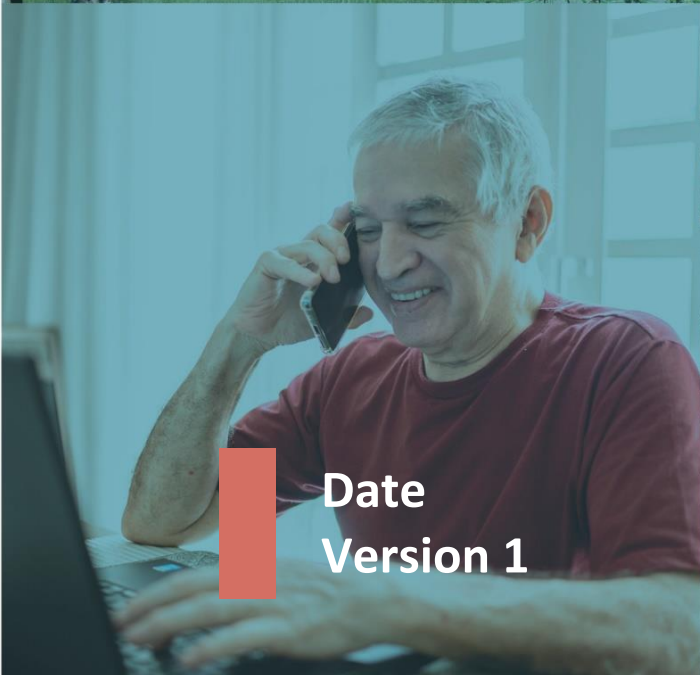




IRO Annual Report 2023-24.



Date
Version 1



Introduction

“We are aspirational for all children and young people. We lead with excellence and promote best practice in partnership with each child and the important people in their life. The child’s voice is key, and we independently advocate and review children’s plans so they can be kept safe and reach their full potential.”

The Safeguarding Service’s vision, 2024

There is a requirement, set out in the IRO handbook (paragraph 7.11), that the IRO service should produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice over the past year and highlight issues for further development.

Separate reports have been produced to look at the activity around the child protection process and the work of the LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) which also sit in the Safeguarding Service.

This report covers the IRO service during the period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. As per the requirements of the handbook, it will set out the work undertaken within the service and provide a commentary regarding the statistical information. It will refer to the procedures around resolving concerns, the extent of participation and the development of the IRO service. It also will review progress in relation to the targets set for the previous year and set new ones for the year ahead.

The role and purpose of the Independent Reviewing Officer

The appointment of an independent reviewing officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

IRO’s make an important contribution to the goal of significantly improving outcomes for looked after children. Their primary focus is to quality assure the care planning process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration.

In March 2010 the Government issued new statutory guidance for local authorities and IRO’s on care planning and reviewing arrangements for looked after children. Broadly the expectations are as follows:

- Promoting the voice of the child
- Ensuring plans are based on up to date detailed and informed assessment
- Identifying any gaps in the assessment process or provision of service

- Making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and their entitlement to one.
- Ensuring that there is no drift and delay in the care planning and delivery of service
- Monitoring the activity of the responsible authority as a corporate parent

It is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, supervise the Social Worker or devise the care plan. It is important for the IRO to develop a relationship with the child.

The primary focus of the IRO is to quality assurance the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given full consideration.

In each childcare review the IRO will consider the holistic care plan for the child paying particular attention to the plan for long term permanency ensuring a consistent plan for the child throughout the duration of their childhood. The IRO will find out about the health, education, emotional and behavioural development of the child alongside issues around identity, family and social relationships, social presentation and self-care skills.

There is an expectation that the IRO will check that the child has appropriate savings and a bank account where appropriate. Rights and entitlements around having a passport and a driving licence are discussed and ensuring that a national insurance number has been applied for when the child is of sufficient age.

Profile

In Milton Keynes, the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and Child Protection Co-ordinator (CPC) functions are combined. Those occupying these roles are known as the Independent Chair (IC) and operate at the level of Team Manager to ensure they are able to challenge effectively. Each IC manages a combined caseload of children who are looked after and children subject to child protection plans.

This year there has been an increase from 7.5 to 10 permanent Independent Chairs situated within the safeguarding service. This is as a result of the increased demand upon the service. The IC's in Milton Keynes are an experienced group of professionals who bring knowledge and skills to their work with young people and their families. Many IC's have had previous experience of management in other areas and have occupied specialist roles. We have had good staff retention with no changes in staff over the past year which has allowed continuity for children and the service alike. Chairs offer expert support to one another and to operational colleagues to achieve the best possible outcomes for looked after children and those leaving care.

Conferences are often managed as hybrid conferences, where the family, IC and the Social Worker attend in person however certain professionals can join via Microsoft Teams, which encourages good attendance from the multiagency network. Chairs continue to liaise with families, carers and professionals in advance of meetings to ensure that the focus remains on the child and that the voice of the child is kept central to the process.

Milton Keynes

Milton Keynes is a growing and expanding city with a younger than average population. The ambition set out in the MK City Plan (2024) is for Milton Keynes to be home to 410k people by 2050, growing from 287,060 residents (2021 census). This is a 42.8% growth in population, making Milton Keynes the third fastest growing city in the UK according to the leading think tank 'centre for cities.' This growth equates to 63,000 new homes between 2022-2050. This is significantly higher than the local identified housing needs of 53,256 new homes.

It is notable that 27.4% of Milton Keynes residents are under the age of 19 years in comparison to the rest of England which is 23.7%, meaning in addition to a rapidly growing population, Milton Keynes also has a much larger percentage of their population that is children. The population growth of Milton Keynes was 1.04% last year in comparison to the rest of England which was 0.83%. Milton Keynes and the national 2021 census showed a 15.4% population growth in comparison to a 6.4% national average. This is the second highest percentage increased in the Southeast of England. The rapidly growing city with a younger population is likely to result in an increased demand in public services, and this demand has begun to be reflected in our increase in Child Protection numbers over this past year.

In terms of the economic profile of Milton Keynes, there are some areas of significant deprivation. Milton Keynes was ranked 211 out of 354 Local Authorities in 2010 (with 1 being the most deprived) and this increased to 181 in 2015. In the 2021 census the Office for National Statistics (ONS) evidenced that 48.7% of households in Milton Keynes were deprived in at least one of the assessed dimensions of deprivation. This statistic masks the true picture of some areas of significant deprivation in Milton Keynes. 18 areas in Milton Keynes are ranked in the 20% most deprived nationally with 8 amongst the most deprived 10%. This is particularly notable within Bletchley East, Woughton and Fishermead wards which were ranked in the 3% most deprived areas in England. There is a high correlation between children on Child Protection Plans within these areas. This is notable as sometimes the family stress of social and economic deprivation can contribute to an increase in neglectful care, mental health challenges and domestic violence. Bywaters et al 2022 summarized research that suggests an incident rate of about 20%.

Children Social Care has experienced a significant impact upon the demand for their services as the population has increased, with 1,613 children being assessed as formally in need for specialist services in July 2016 in comparison to 2,015 children as of August 2023, which is a 24.9% increase in Child in Need cases. This has decreased over the past year to 1,874 in March 2024 which is a 6.9% decrease, however, remains a high number of children identified in need of specialist services. Positively there has been significant investment and reorganisation within the service to accommodate this growing need.

In 2023 there was a restructure of the Family Support Teams to accommodate the demand on services, and in 2024 there have been further restructures and investment within the wider service. The Children with Disabilities Team have gone through an extensive improvement plan and has expanded to 3 team managers from the previous 1 team manager. There is now a separate service for the short breaks for children with disabilities and 2 teams for the statutory Child in Need or Child Protection cases. This has allowed more management oversight of our most vulnerable children, ensuring care plans are carefully put together and reviewed. The Multi-Agency Referral Hub (MASH) has also had a restructure at the end of 2024 and has expanded to 4 team managers and 1 service manager, from the previous 1 team

manager and 3 deputy team managers. This has allowed the MASH to be structured with a clear triage 'duty' service, assessment team and emergency social work team.

Currently the Independent Chairs undertake a Dual Role, completing both the Independent Child Protection Chair role and the Independent Reviewing Officer role, holding a mixed case load. This year we have had an increase in 2.5 Independent Chairs to accommodate the increase in demand we have been experiencing. A paper has been completed that considers the dual role and its impact upon the service. This paper evaluated if any changes to this would be beneficial, given the increased demand on the service.

The knowledge, experience, and practice wisdom of the Independent Chairs provides valuable contribution and leadership for the service. It was concluded that with the increased demand on the Safeguarding service the need to work robustly without compromising the quality and standards of the service was becoming more challenging. The two roles work within two different statutory frameworks with competing demands in relation to statutory responsibilities. The recommendation was therefore to create specialised, focused, and separate roles that will offer the Chairs the opportunity to work in a more focused and robust manner. There is a planned launch of a consultation process which will propose the independent chair roles splits to become 2 roles: the Independent Reviewing Officer and the Independent Child Protection Chair. It is reasonable to consider it possible the numbers of Looked after Children may also increase in the coming years as the local general population, the Child in Need and Child Protection populations increase.

The IC role has been integral to offering stability, quality assurance and support during this period of change and restructure. Given the increase in demand upon the operational teams it is anticipated an increase in demand will be seen in the Safeguarding service and planning for the impact of this will be a key focus over the next 12 months.

Reflections 2022-23

Several priorities were set last year.

What has worked well?

- **Child first:** Towards the end of this year, we have seen the 'child first' approach launch in Milton Keynes (see picture 1), which promotes valuing children's lived experiences, making decisions that prioritise them, and ensuring our interventions are making a positive difference in their lives. The way we do this is to ensure the right interventions are offered at the right time, and that children are kept within their families when it is safe to do so. The Independent Chairs have been at the forefront of this launch alongside senior managers, setting and leading the expectations and standards of best practice which incorporates a 'child first' Milton Keynes.

Picture 1 – ‘The child first Milton Keynes.’



Core principles

Hear them

Empower them

Link them

Protect them

- **Reorganization of the service:** Given the continued pressure on the service and the anticipated growth of the city, it is likely these pressures will only increase over the coming years. There is a plan to launch the consultation process to split the role independent chair role into two separate roles, the independent child protection chair and the independent reviewing officer. It is hoped this in part, coupled with the additional resource of 2.5 new chairs will allow the service to improve the timeliness of child care review and distribution.
- **Staff retention and capacity:** The team remains stable and has increased by 2.5 new chairs over the past year to accommodate the increase in children subject to Child Protection Plans and those who are looked after.
- **Quality and assurance:** A new Q&A framework has launched in the past year and includes monthly highlight reports of audits, targeted training and independent learning reviews which offer more in depth learning on specific cases. Independent Chairs have been pivotal in the implementation of this new framework in a scrutiny role to ensure the quality, safety and effectiveness of safeguarding practice and policy. All chairs contribute to the monthly audits of cases, providing an understanding of the quality of practice and identifying any themes where there are specific strengths in practice or development is required. Chairs also sit on the different permanence panels to track children’s plans for permanence, ensuring there is no drift or delay.
- **Promoting best practice:** Chairs are linked to teams and regularly attend team meetings to improve communication and strengthen relationships.
- **Signs of safety:** 2 of the chairs are SOS champions and are involved in promoting and sharing the application of this approach across the service. Chairs also continue to use Signs of Safety to good effect. This includes ‘mappings’ in conference.

- **Recording:** Several key forms on LCS have changed over the past 12 months and the ICs have taken the lead to ensure we have a more intuitive ICS system to support oversight, recording and review of children's records.
- **Writing to the child:** As a 'child first' Milton Keynes we write all our minutes to the child. This practice is embedded and allows practitioners and the important people in the child's life who read the minutes to be thinking about the impact of what is being discussed upon the child. We believe this approach encourages the reader to consider the matters being discussed from their child's perspective and keeps their voice and lived experiences present throughout.
- **Letters to children:** The ICs routinely write direct to the children and provide them with their direct contact details, so they are easily accessible to the children on their case load. This means children can easily communicate with their IRO should they have a worry about their care planning, and their voice can remain central to their planning.
- **Permanence planning:** There is a new permanence planning pathway which creates additional senior management oversight through service manager and head of service panels. ICs sit on these panels and provide the contribution of the child's IC to ensure their voice is advocated and remains central to their care planning.
- **Midway reviews:** We refocused on prioritising Midway reviews in between review child care Reviews this year, this allows us to track the progress of the child care Plan between reviews and pick up and tackle any drift and delay for these cases. A new form was generated that allows us to formalise this process and clearly hold to account the case holding teams if there is drift and delay with care planning.
- **Unregistered placement policy:** A new policy was launched that creates more senior management overview for children cared for in unregistered placements. ICs also will complete 12 weekly reviews for the duration of their time in an unregistered placement, which is at a high frequency than the statutory requirement, given the recognition these children are likely to be more vulnerable.
- **Southwark Judgement:** 16/17-year-old homeless young people who are entitled to accommodation under S20 have been more proactively identified and offered appropriate advice to ensure they are aware of their rights under the judgement and offered services under S20 should they want this.
- **Return from home conversations:** These conversations are happening in a timelier manner. The Philomena protocol is due to be launched in Milton Keynes which should ensure children who are missing are being correctly reported as such, with a clear risk assessment outlining the expected response from all agencies.

What are we worried about?

- **Care Plans:** Some care plans have not always been updated prior to a child care Review for all Children in Care. Having access to the plan before the meeting is important to ensure it is carefully considered and scrutinised to ensure it fully meets the child's needs. In order to mitigate this the IROs often have a meeting with the Social Worker prior to the review to ensure they are clear about what is in the care plan.
- **Advocacy:** The use of advocates for Children in Care is not as high as it could be and the reasons for this need to be considered.
- **Placement sufficiency:** There is a national challenge with placement sufficiency and a lack of appropriate local placements means that 46.9% of placements are located outside Milton Keynes.
- **Placement stability:** 18% of children have 3 or more placements. This is in part linked to the challenges with placement sufficiency, meaning sometimes children are initially placed in emergency placements which they must move on from after a short period. There needs to be a focus on recruiting and training resilient foster carers.
- **Health assessments:** Initial and review health assessments aren't always completed in a timely manner. This could impact our ability to best understand and meet children's health needs.
- **Transitions to adulthood:** The transition to adulthood can be a difficult time for all children, but acutely more so for Children who are looked after. For some children, they worry about where they will live and what support they will have when they reach adulthood. Timely planning with adult services is imperative and needs to be tracked at all Child Care Reviews.
- **Caseloads:** caseloads of ICs have been high over the past year and surpassed the IRO handbook guidelines. This has made it a challenge for IROs to as robustly scrutinise and oversee children's cases.

Data and Performance

Changes in LAC population

Table 1 shows the number and rate of LAC during the period 2023 – 24. The numbers of looked after children in care have gradually increased over the course of the year by 12.3% with 57.9 children looked after per 10,000 compared to the previous years 52.2. This remains lower than the national average of 71, although closer to statistical neighbours of 66.3. It is important to consider how our number of Looked after Children compares to the rest of the nation as it is important that we are confident we are making children looked after under the correct circumstances. Any significant outlier to our statistical neighbours or the national average, we need to understand what we are doing differently to ensure children are safely cared for within their families, not requiring them to become looked after.

An emphasis on throughput remains a priority in Milton Keynes which means that, where possible, permanence options through Adoption, Special Guardianship Orders and return to family are explicitly considered which ensures that children only remain 'looked after' where this is the most appropriate option for them. We recognise the strength of long term matched foster placements in specific circumstances. Consequently, the number of looked after children in Milton Keynes is lower than the national average and our statistical neighbours, in part due to successfully securing permanence within the wider family where appropriate. Positively 21.4% of children left care due to becoming subject to child arrangements order or a special guardianship order. We do need to approach this with caution however, as we have a slightly higher number of children with 3+ placement moves (17%) compared to the national average of 15%. We need to understand if any of these are as a consequence of SGO arrangements breaking down, meaning early permanence has not been sought for these children. This should be a focus of audit in the next 12 months.

The Independent Chair will explicitly consider all the ways that permanency may be achieved in each Childcare Review and Midway Monitoring. This may include considering a return to birth family where appropriate and safe. In this instance the Independent Chair will always advocate that a clear assessment that outlines what has changed to mean this is now a safe option for the child is completed, ensuring these moves are in the child's best interest and aren't likely to breakdown.

There has been a review of the permanence tracking processes in place this year, which provides robust senior management oversight of the care plans for these children. There are panels chaired by service managers every 6 weeks and then a panel chaired by heads of service every 14 weeks. This provides scrutiny and prevents drift and delay in progressing permanence for these children.

The data concerning the numbers of looked after children is also closely monitored and scrutinised by the operational teams and the safeguarding service through performance management meetings, Placement and Budget Sufficiency group and External Placements panel to ensure that we fully understand the reason that children become looked after and consider permanency options at the earliest opportunity.

The emergency LAC panel is also well established, and this looks at creative ways of supporting older children within their families by making resources available, thus identifying which children require S20 accommodation and which can be safely cared for by their family with support. This prevents children becoming accommodated in crisis situations where the opportunity to carefully match children with their placements is less available.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

Table 2; Number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
USAC 21/22	21	20	23	23	23	23	25	26	27	28	33	28
USAC	27	25	25	25	28	26	27	33	32	34	32	32

22/23												
UASC 23/24	31	32	36	39	40	44	43	41	41	39	43	46

The number of children who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children has increased over the past year, which started on 32 children and ended on 46. Milton Keynes Council is part of the National Transfer Scheme, and this is likely to continue have an impact on the numbers of UASC's arriving in the year ahead as we seek to relieve the pressure on other authorities. It is anticipated that we will reach a minimum of 60 UASC over the course of the next year. The continent from which most children are originating from are Africa (41%) from countries such as Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Notably the majority of children are boys with only 3 girls out of the 46.

This is a cohort of children who will have potentially experienced significant complex trauma and will have care needs which could be different to the many other care experienced children. Their legal status and specific knowledge around age assessments and how to support these children in a way that is mindful of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice is paramount. Quite often their care needs can be simplified as a placement issue, however they have the same rights to the promotion of the agenda set out in the 'National Framework' as all other children in Milton Keynes.

There has been a focus this year on ensuring these children are provided with permanency as any other child would, through matching in appropriate long term foster placements where appropriate. Last year it was identified there was a need to develop an IRO who can lead with these specific cases so they can support Social Workers and have a clear specialist understanding of the complexities of these cases. This specialist IRO could lead on promoting cultural competence and the impact of inter-generational trauma as well as considering health needs specific to this group of children. The need for this will increase with the national dispersal scheme which is likely to lead to more UASC being placed in Milton Keynes. With the planned restructure this will be further considered, and an IRO has been identified to complete age assessment training, so they are well positioned to fully understand and advise for children requiring age assessments upon their arrival to the UK and MK.

Family Group Conferencing Service

FGC Services contribute significantly to the MK Child First approach and Signs of Safety practice model. Children are always visited as part of the FGC process and their voice central to the conference process. This service provides a cost effective and family focused means to reduce the need for looked after children, court proceedings and child protection plans and the concomitant costs (financial and staff time).

Milton Keynes Council works hard to ensure they are practising in a manner that is consistent with the Southwark Judgement whilst ensuring all options are considered before a child becomes looked after. A multi-agency edge of care panel sits weekly, and a range of interventions are considered to support young people and their families. In particular the Family Group Conference Service is used to good effect and is instrumental in enabling

families and networks to step in and make good decisions about supporting young people where there are worries about them at home.

This service can also be used when considering stepping a child or young person down from a placement and returning them to their family to ensure that a robust support plan is in place. This year has been some occasions when this service has been adapted to look at support with adoption breakdowns and lifelong links for children as they move on from the care environment, to support them to look at their support networks and they move to independence. This will continue to be a focus for the next 12 months. The Family Group Conferencing service has also published their annual report which evidences the positive impact of this service in more detail.

[Family Group Conference Service | Milton Keynes City Council \(milton-keynes.gov.uk\)](https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/family-group-conference-service)

Unregistered Placements

The position regarding unregistered placements has come under greater scrutiny in recent years. A ban on placing vulnerable children under the age of 16 in unregistered accommodation came into force in September 2021. This means that a looked after child under 16, are not allowed to be placed in an unregulated independent or semi-independent provision. OFSTED has announced its intention to inspect and register unregulated accommodation providers for 16- and 17-year-olds in care and this change is expected imminently.

This year there has been the introduction of the unregistered placements policy which requires ICs to complete a child care review upon the move of a child to an unregistered placement, and at a greater frequency that required within the statutory framework of every 12 weeks for the duration of the placement. There is also a requirement for a Head of Service to visit the child in this placement within 72 hours of them being placed to ensure it is a safe home for them to reside in whilst the home either works to achieve their OFSTED registration or a registered placement is identified.

Profile of children in Care

It is important to reflect upon the profile of our looked after children. This means that we can ensure that their unique identity needs are properly met within placements and by specialist services. The fostering and adoption services are involved in recruitment of carers from a range of background and profiles to promote our ability to match children to placements where their needs will be met and where they will be able to develop a sense of identity which takes account of all aspects of their care.

It is notable that in Milton Keynes the general BAME population is 28.2% which is higher than the national average of 21.9%. However, these children are disproportionately represented in the care population of Milton Keynes at 41.6% which is a notable increase from last year's 38.3%. This isn't consistent with the national picture, where it is also acknowledged as a concern but not as significantly, with 7% of black children are part of the care population, in comparison to 5% within the general population of children. This is highlighted in Barnardo's

paper 'double discrimination – Black Care experienced young adults navigating the criminal justice system (see link below).

[Double Discrimination - Black care-experienced young adults navigating the criminal justice system report.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/reports-and-publications/double-discrimination-black-care-experienced-young-adults-navigating-the-criminal-justice-system-report.pdf)

Recommendations from this research highlights the need nationally for a recruitment drive of Foster Carers, however this is more pronounced for children who are BAME. The paper states'

'Our research highlights how too often Black children who face significant trauma and isolation before coming into care, find this is exacerbated when they enter the system due to a lack of consideration for their identity and cultural needs.....A key part of this drive to think about recruitment and retention of foster carers must be to ensure that carers are recruited who can meet the different needs of different cohorts of children who enter the care system. To ensure that all Black children in the care system have access to cultural appropriate care and drawing on the recommendations of the Black Care Experience Network.'

Milton Keynes has a campaign in place to recruit and train more foster carers and it is imperative consideration is given to appealing to a varied range of carers who can meet the specific cultural needs of our children. It is incredibly positive that year there has been a commitment to setting up a 'mockingbird' programme which is led by The Fostering Network in the UK and delivers sustainable foster care. It is an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community. This model offers wrap around support from experienced foster carers to existing carers in a extended family style model. It is envisioned this will support us to recruit and attract more foster carers who will be able to offer sustainable long-term care to our children.

Another recommendation from this paper relevant to us when considering the high number of BAME children in our care population, to for appropriate and timely access to mental health services for children. The paper states;

'Data suggests that almost half of all looked-after children have a diagnosable mental health disorder compared to one in six children in the general population. Care-experienced young people face significant barriers in accessing mental health support. For example, Barnardo's Neglected Minds report found that 65% of care experienced young people whom workers identified as having mental health needs were not currently receiving any statutory service. This problem is likely to be worse for many Black young people in care, given the substantial evidence that there are significant racial inequalities in access to mental health services in the general population, including evidence that Black people are less likely to access mental health services through via primary care and instead are overrepresented in crisis care.'

It is therefore a key focus of the Independent Chairs in full awareness of how children from a BAME background often have their mental health needs neglected, ensure the strength and difficulties questionnaire is routinely completed for all looked after children at the appropriate intervals and that scores that exceed 17 result in a referral to CAMHs. This has continued to be a focus this year, and there are plans for CAMHs to recruit a Consultant Clinical Psychologist who will lead for mental health services specifically for children in care. It is hoped this role will be able to support us to continue to prioritise and support the mental health needs for children who are in care.

Table 3 – Ethnicity and Gender breakdown of children in care population

Ethnicity	Percentage
A1 White British	54%
A2 White Irish	0.49%
A3 Any Other White Background	3.9%
A4 Traveller of Irish Heritage	0%
B1 White and Black Caribbean	5.6%
B2 White and Black African	0.2%
B3 White and Asian	2.6%
B4 Any Other Mixed Background	7.8%
C3 Bangladeshi	0.2%
C4 Any Other Asian Background	6.6%
D1 Caribbean	0.73%
D2 African	11%
D3 Any Other Black Background	1.96%
E2 Any Other Ethnic Group	4.92%
Gender	Percentage
Female	38.5%
Male	61.3%
Transgender	0.2%

Table 4 – Type of placement for children in care at year end

Type of placement	At 31.03.2024	At 31.03.2023	At 31.03.22	At 31.03.21
Foster placements – U1,2,3,4,5,6	71.4%	86%	71.5%	71%
Secure accommodation – K1	0%	1%	0.6%	1%
Homes and Hostels – K2, K3	6.34%	3.8%	3.6%	5%
Hostels and other supportive residential placements – H5	6.36%	3.1%	8.3%	7%
Residential schools – S1	0%	0%	0%	0%
Other residential settings – R1,2,3,4	4.89%	3.1%	2.8%	0%
Placed for adoption – A3,4,5,6	3.91%	0.6%	3%	5%
Placed with own parents - P1	5.13%	3.1%	9.7%	9%
In lodgings, residential employment or living independently – P2,3	0.24%	0%	0.3%	2%
Other placement – Z1	0.98%	0%	0.3%	0%

Most children and young people continue to be placed in foster placements. However, the number with foster parents has decreased from 86% to 71%, which is in part due to the increased in requirement for children to be placed in residential settings which has increased from 3.1% to 6.36%. There has also been an increase in children placed with their own parents from 3.1% to 5.1%. This is a positive change, as there is a focus to assessing parents carefully

before reunification meaning after a period of transition Care Orders are being appropriately revoked.

Milton Keynes remains committed to promoting permanency for children and young people. We are proud of our focus on keeping children within their wider families and networks where this can be managed safely. Extended families and foster carers are encouraged to care for children under a Special Guardianship Order which confers parental responsibility and ensures that children are no longer looked after. Thereby giving them a sense of security and longevity in relation to their placement. A support Services panel is well established which considers packages of support for this cohort.

For a small minority of children, residential childrens homes will be the most appropriate setting to provide them with the care and safety they required. However, for the majority of children, returning to a family style setting, where they are able to build loving and caring relationships with trusted care givers will be in their best interests. There has been an increased focus on ensuring all children residing in residential childrens homes have a clear step down plan, so everyone working with the child knows what needs to be achieved in order for the child to be able to return to a family style setting and the steps required to achieve this. Careful and robust scrutiny of children placed in residential children's homes, via individual care planning as well as a monthly external placements panel chaired by a senior manager ensures that these placements are purposeful and lead to good transition arrangements to semi-independent, stepdown to fostering or return to family in a timely manner.

The figure for children in secure accommodation remains positive with 0% of children subject to Secure Orders at the end of 2023. There are strict criteria which is in place to protect this cohort and can only be used when no other type of accommodation is considered sufficient to keep the young person safe. It is important to plan for these children to return to the community as soon as this can be safely achieved. Placements of this type are monitored very closely. Regular meetings take place which include an entirely independent panel member to ensure that the panel can determine and recommend whether criteria continue to be met.

Average IRO caseload 22-23

The ICs average caseload has been high and averaged 90 cases for this period, which has been a combination of children subject to Child Protection Plans and Looked after Children. The IRO handbook recommends that a caseload for a fulltime IRO should be between 55-70 to be able to full execute their duties as expected. It is a concern that caseloads have been consistently higher than this for a considerable period and given the planned population growth of Milton Keynes it is anticipated the workload pressures are more likely to increase. Planning for the future of the service a consultation is due to launch to begin to separate the roles into 2 distinct roles ; The Independent Child Protection Chair and the Independent Reviewing Officer roles.

Childcare reviews held in Timescales.

The IRO handbook sets out a requirement for Initial Childcare Reviews to be held within 20 working days of becoming looked after. Subsequent reviews are held after 3 months and thereafter at no more than 6 monthly intervals.

Good practice suggests that an early review should be held following any unexpected change to the care plan. This might include an unplanned move. There is also an expectation that a Childcare Review will be convened to agree to cease the Looked After Child status where this has not been part of the previously agreed plan.

On occasion, in specific circumstances, an agreement may be reached to hold fewer formal Childcare Reviews in the case of long term settled placements. This can only be considered where a young person is in full agreement and all those involved in the care plan consider it to be appropriate. In cases such as these, a formal review should be held annually but a less formal review will still take place at the six-month point which is recorded on the child’s file.

Table 5 – Service performance relating to timeliness of childcare reviews

Performance	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Was the review in timescale	98%	96%	95%	90%
Outcomes and minutes distributed in timescale	56%	44%	66.9%	72%

A total of 906 meetings were held over the last year in comparison to the previous year’s 864 meetings which shows a slight increase of 4.8%. There was a noticeable decrease in Childcare reviews being completed within timescales this past year which is a reflection of the increased workloads, more children placed at a distance and the impact of long-term staff absence. Additionally, children each time there is an unplanned placement move for a child another Childcare review is arranged. Given the number of children with 3+ placement moves, this can mean some IROs have a number of unexpected Child Care Reviews to schedule which can have an impact on the timeliness of these meetings.

To address these challenges and to ensure we have tolerance within the system to be able to respond in a timely manner, a consultation is planned to consider separating the independent chair role. This will allow the IROs to be able to robustly focus on their children in care, and not be balancing the competing statutory responsibilities of children subject to Child Protection Plans, which often require conferences to be convened in a shorter timeframe.

Positively, distribution of the meetings completed has increased further this year to 72% and it is hoped that with the split of the dual role this figure will continue to increase over the next 12 months

5.9 Distribution following a child care review.

Once a Childcare Review has been held the statutory guidance within the IRO handbook stipulates outcomes of this meeting should be distributed within 20 working days. The

Independent chairs have not distributed their outcomes consistently within timescales over the years, an average of 44% within timescales for the year 2021/22, 56% within timescales for the year 2020/21 and an improvement to 66.9% in 2022/23. This improvement has continued this year and is now 72% within timescales. It is hoped with the restructure of the service this should further improve over the next 12 months.

The importance of the timely distribution of these outcomes is to practice in a manner that is consistent with the agreed standards of best practice that ensures that we are working in a multi-agency way. This means all professionals and family within the child's network and plan are aware of their role within the plan and accountable to fulfil this role to ensure the welfare of the child. Without this documentation there is the concern drift, delay and poor communication could adversely impact of the child's welfare and rights being promoted and protected.

A review of the service was completed this year which specifically considered the benefit of the dual Child Protection/Independent Reviewing Officer role and the benefits and drawbacks to splitting this role. The conclusion was that splitting the roles will allow the IROs to focus solely on one role, allowing them to take a more robust approach and improve the timeliness of their performance. This review also considered whether it was necessary to appoint any additional IROs to manage the increased workloads and an additional 2.5 independent chairs joined the service this year, which resulted in performance improving for the latter period of the year.

Monitoring and Scrutiny

The fundamental tasks of the IC are to monitor and scrutinise the activity of the Local Authority as a corporate parent, ensuring that it is operating in line with care planning regulations and meeting the needs of children and young people in its care. Where this is not the case, it is the duty of the IC to challenge robustly and ensure a suitable outcome.

A new midway monitoring process has been launched this year, which requires the ICs to complete a file review and meeting with the social worker at the mid-way point between CCRs. The focus of this review is to ensure the file is up to date, the care plan is progressing as expected and that it is continuing to be in the best interests of the child. The IC may make recommendations or raise any concerns as part of this monitoring process, with the focus being to secure timely permanence for the child and ensuring that loving and caring relationships to be formed and maintained.

The ICs also sit on the new permanence planning panels that have launched this year. There are 5 panels; children placed for adoption, children subject to S20, children in unmatched placements children placed with parents and children subject to new interim care orders. These panels are chaired by service managers, and the focus is to ensure early permanence is identified for children, whether that be in Local Authority care or within their wider family network. The aim of the panel is to scrutinise the plans in place to ensure they are the correct plans to meet the child's immediate but also long term care and development needs. The plans devised within these panels are then presented to the Head of Service panel, adding an additional layer of senior management oversight and scrutiny for these most vulnerable children. These panels have newly launched and the next 12 months will be spent carefully evaluating and understanding their impact.

Quality of Planning

It is an integral part of the role of the IC to quality assure the care planning for the child. This includes scrutiny of the Care/Pathway plan, the Placement Plan and the Health and Education plans (EHCP). Each should be considered at Childcare Reviews to ensure that actions are discussed and progressed, and that drift and delay is identified, and progress ensured. Any concerns identified to the quality of care planning is addressed through the dispute resolutions protocol, which formalises the concern held by the IC and requests management or senior management oversight of the concern as appropriate to resolve.

This year the quality assurance framework was launched which includes frequent case file audits and in depth independent learning reviews (ILRs) of cases where there is a concern that there have been missed opportunities to provide the best service to a child or young person within our care. The ICs have been integral in supporting with the development and launch of this framework and there are 4 new practice development leads (PDLs) who work alongside the principal social worker to execute this level of scrutiny.

The highlight report of CLA care plans in March 2024 evidenced that 55% of plans audited were inadequate, 30% were requires improvement and only 15% of plans were good. The main findings were that plans were not SMART; Specific, measurable, agreed, realistic or timely. There were too many generic actions such as 'improve your independence skills' and too many open-ended timeframes such as 'on-going.'

As a consequence, there are planned workshops to improve the quality of plans being devised which will be delivered to the operational teams by the PDLs with the support of the ICs. The focus here is for the ICs to use their skill and experience to support upskilling the workforce to deliver plans that are SMART and child focused. The benefit of a SMART plan is that it ensures all involved are clear about what is expected of them, and in what timeframe, preventing drift and delay with the progress of the child's care plan.

Participation and advocacy

Children and young people are routinely visited by the Independent Chair between reviews to ensure that they are properly consulted and fully involved in shaping their Child Care review meeting. Ideally, they should be involved in making decisions about who should attend their meeting and where it will be held. Where a young person wishes to chair their own meeting, this is encouraged and facilitated. Independent Chairs routinely write to children following their reviews with a record of their meeting. This has been well received by children and young people and encourages their participation.

This year we have promoted the use of advocates for children who are looked after. The benefit of the advocates is that they help children to fully understand their rights and options and support them to express their views and wishes to the relevant services. 44 children have been referred for advocates which equates to 12% of looked after children. There will be a focus on the next 12 months on promoting the use of advocates to support children where appropriate to have their voice heard and central to decisions being made about their lives.

Over the next 12 months we need to more robustly evaluate the impact advocacy has had upon supporting children to be better included in their care plans and decisions that impact them.

Challenge and Dispute Resolution

It is a key function of the Independent Reviewing Officer, as outlined in the IRO handbook. To challenge on behalf of a child or young person to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. To ensure this, a local dispute resolution process must be in place. It is equally important to recognise and celebrate good practice with the practitioner and their line manager.

In line with the guidance, there is an expectation that the Independent Chair will speak to the Social Worker in the first instance, involving their manager if necessary to raise concerns and try to resolve any issues which arise in an informal arena. Where this is the case, the Independent Chair should ensure that this activity is clearly recorded on the LCS recording system using the IRO dispute resolution tab. This ensures that there is a clear record of action taken on behalf of the child or young person and that there is an IRO footprint to be found on the file.

Where an issue cannot be resolved in this way, the Independent Chair is required to complete the dispute resolutions form which can be found on the child's electronic file. This may still be classified as an informal dispute resolution in the first instance although the IRO has a responsibility to escalate where they consider that this might be necessary. The legislation provides for a referral to CAFCASS at any point in the process.

Table 6. Record of Dispute resolutions.

Dispute type	21/22	22/23	23/24
Informal Dispute		164	171
Formal Dispute	30	41	60

In the year 2023/234 there were 60 formal DRs and 171 informal DRs which is slight increase on the previous year's disputes. This evidences that the IROs are utilising this process on occasions to address drift and delay within the service. The significantly larger proportion of informal disputes relates to the IROs ability to work alongside Social Workers to robustly scrutinise practice and make these challenges and resolve them at an earlier stage. To do this in a way that has a positive impact for the child the IRO needs the time and space. This means they can work in a solution focused way that provides a positive challenge and develops good working relationships with the child, family, carers and Social Worker.

The main themes identified within these DRs related to drift and delay in care planning, specifically a delay in Social Workers updating care plans or concerns that actions from Child Care Reviews haven't been followed up in a timely manner. The majority of disputes were resolved within a week however there were a fairly significant number that took considerably longer, 3 of which took between 60-65 days to be resolved. In this instances it was necessary to include the Head of Service in resolving the concerns. Two of these concerns related to the misunderstanding of the difference between a private family arrange and when a child has become looked after under S20. When there is no parent able or willing to exercise their

parental responsibility, or maybe they are prevented from doing so because of police bail conditions for example, the child would be regarded as looked after under S20. This particular practice issue is an example of how the ICs have shifted practice and upskilled the workforce to ensure children are cared for in a manner that is consistent with best practice principles, guidance and legislation.

Secure Accommodation Reviews

The Service Manager for Safeguarding is responsible for chairing Secure Accommodation Reviews to ensure that the criteria for keeping a child in a secure home on welfare grounds is met. It is good practice to hold the Childcare review meeting separately as these two meetings have very different agendas and focus. There is also a requirement for two independent panel members to attend. One of these usually comes from the safeguarding service. The purpose of the panel is to recommend whether the criteria is met for the secure placement and that actions are in place which will encourage transition.

During the period between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023 there were 2 different children who spent periods of time in secure care facilities and both of these children were successfully moved to alternative placements. This is an improvement on the previous year when 4 children spent periods of time in secure, one child for a considerable time of approximately 2 years over a number of different admissions. It is important that we continue to work closely with our colleagues in health and commissioning to ensure appropriate stepdown plans are identified and sought from the first day a child moves into the secure accommodation. The success of this transition will hinge on the quality of the step-down plan and the provisions identified being suitable to meet these children often complex needs.

For these 2 children who have moved on from secure provisions, there have been very careful and personalised care plans identified, with the correct placement for them in the community secured. This at times has required the use of Deprivation of Liberties Orders and unregistered placements. The IROs have ensured these children have been very carefully monitored to ensure these placements have been able to fulfil these children's identified care plans. The introduction of the unregistered placements policy has further strengthened practice in this area, ensuring senior leadership oversight of these children's care planning and the quality of the placement provision.

In the next 12 months we do need to consider more carefully how to best support this vulnerable group of children, as the use of DOL orders and unregistered placements should be used sparingly. Quite often these orders can contribute to the child experiencing further trauma, having their liberties deprived. The use of these orders needs to be very carefully balanced with the presenting risks presented to the child. These orders should be regularly reviewed and used for the least amount of time possible, with a clear step-down plan to be identified from the beginning of the order.

Quality Assurance

The safeguarding service continues to be a key part of quality assurance activity. The Independent Chair holds a key role in relation to the improvement and quality assurance of the care planning for Looked After Children in a strategic way as well as individually and for

challenging any drift and delay. This is achieved in several ways. ICs routinely play a key role in undertaking monthly case file audits, sitting with the allocated worker. They are involved in thematic audits and are uniquely placed to identify overarching themes and trends. ICs prepare complex reports for presentation to senior management collating and interpreting quarterly data.

Independent Chairs are expected to contribute to household reviews in respect of foster carers and residential provision. They work closely with colleagues in commissioning and fostering to ensure that services for children are of good quality.

Independent Chair work closely with LADO colleagues where there are concerns about foster carers or others working in a position of trust with our children and young people. They offer good, evidence-based information which contributes to defensible decision making in the event of a managing allegations meeting.

There is an opportunity given the unique oversight and position of the Independent Chair in the service to support with upskilling staff and delivering teaching about best practice. With the Independent Chair's current caseloads this isn't something that has been possible, however with the planned service review it offers an opportunity to consider this.

Summary

We began this year following a year where Childrens Social Care had experienced several significant changes with a restructure of the family support service. This year the need to expand and grow has continued and there has been a further reorganisation of the family support service, moving from 4 teams to 3 hubs of 3 teams totalling 9 teams plus the contextual safeguarding team. There has been an improvement plan for the children with disabilities service actioned this year, which as seen 2 new Team Mangers within this service. The MASH service has started a consultation process to restructure this service in response to the increased of referrals into the MASH each year. The safeguarding service itself has expanded this year, with 2.5 new ICs appointed to accommodate the increase in children subject to Child Protection Plans and becoming Looked after.

A service review for Safeguarding was completed in 2023. This service review considered how we could adapt to the changing population and need within Milton Keynes. The focus of this review considered the benefits of splitting the dual Independent Chair role into two distinctly separate roles, the Independent Child Protection Chair, and the Independent Reviewing Officer. The reason being that increased workloads means there is an acute need to be able to as robust and efficient as possible. Balancing the competing demands of the two very different roles, working to legislative different frameworks and timescales can be challenging. Allowing the Chairs to focus on one element of practice can in part address some of the long standing on time concerns for distribution of outcomes of Childcare reviews. In addition, it will allow the Chairs capacity to contribute more fully to the development of practice within the wider service to the benefit of all Looked after Children.

Last year I discussed the Independent Review of Children's Social Care by Josh MacAlister which was published in May 2022. This makes wide ranging recommendations which will have an impact on all areas of Children's Social Care. On 2nd February 2023 the Government published its response 'stable homes, built on love'. We are now over a year since this paper

was published and we have had the opportunity to consider its impact upon our practice in Milton Keynes.

Towards the end of this year, we have seen the 'child first' approach launch in Milton Keynes, which promotes valuing children's lived experiences, making decisions that prioritise them, and ensuring our interventions are making a positive difference in their lives. The way we do this is to ensure the right interventions are offered at the right time, and that children are kept within their families when it is safe to do so, and when it is not safe to do so to ensure safe and loving homes are provided. The Independent Chairs have been at the forefront of this launch alongside senior managers, setting and leading the expectations and standards of best practice which incorporates a 'child first' Milton Keynes.

In consideration of ensuring stable and loving home for children there remains a continued focus on utilising Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and upon ensuring children are returned home to their parent's care when its assessed as safe to do, and rescinding Care Orders in a timely manner when appropriate. It is reassuring that this approach is consistent with the Government current proposals, which will be directing best practice over the coming years.

Over the next 12 months there needs to be a focus on the different routes to permanence for all children. For some children consideration to early permanence will be appropriate, with a view to minimising the number of carers a child has during their childhood. Multiple carers and placement moves can be harmful to a child and impact their ability to build healthy attachments and relationships. For a small number of children alternative placement options need to be available such as residential homes or in emergency circumstances unregistered placements. It is important that the care for these, most vulnerable children, is carefully scrutinised and monitored and they are moved onto appropriate placements or the home becomes registered as a priority.

For a small number of children who may find being cared for in a family style setting challenging residential care may be an appropriate alternative. In these circumstances we should always be considering what needs to be done to identify when the appropriate time should be to move the child into a family style setting, such as a foster placement or a return to family, and what support would be needed to achieve this.

It is notable that Milton Keynes has begun to take a more data lead approach to Social Work practice. The introduction of 'powerbi' about a year ago allows data to be analysed quickly and more efficiently, highlighting areas of concern or strength in practice. This ensures management attention can be directed where needed promptly for children and recognises the need to take a more strategic approach to planning services that are unique to Milton Keynes and our Looked after Children. This has been evidenced in the performance of the operational teams where statutory visits to children, updating of care plans and supervision is more closely scrutinised and performance is gradually beginning to become more consistent as a consequence.

Priorities for 2022-23

Impact

- A consultation within the safeguarding service to be launched to proceed with the plan to split the Independent Chair role into 2 distinct roles which will allow the

creation of an Independent Reviewing Officer role. This will allow the IROs to have a robust and focused approach to out looked after children and promote excellent standards of performance from our IROs for our children.

- The next year there will be a focus on further imbedding the permanence planning process, which was launched this year, to ensure children are achieving permanence in a timely manner. ICs will continue to sit on these panels to ensure their oversight and opportunity to influence the development of care plans for children that are in line with best practice.
- Early permanence where appropriate needs to be considered for all children when they come into care, to minimise the amount of carers each child has and the impact this can have upon their ability to form stable attachments and build positive relationships.
- A 'mocking bird' constellation is being set up to attract foster carers to Milton Keynes and to support them in caring for our children, providing stable and loving homes.
- An unregistered placements policy has been launched, providing a robust and standardised approach to how these placements are scrutinized and managed for some of our most vulnerable and complex children.
- There is now a need to further consider how we are care planning for children subject to Deprivation of Liberties (DOLs) orders, as these are often children residing in unregistered placements and these restrictive orders should not be utilized without careful consideration and only for as long as absolutely necessary.
- Weekly performance data will continue to be circulated to chairs to flag up timescales for outcomes/minutes.
- Completion of outcomes/minutes will continue to be monitored in supervision and alongside service managers within the service.
- Trends in data that tells us about the needs of our looked after children are discussed in monthly and quarterly Performance Management Meetings.
- Where care plans have not been completed, outcomes/minutes will continue to be sent out in word and recorded on the child's file, ensuring we are compliant with statutory expectations.
- Weekly touchdown meetings will continue to ensure practice issues are promptly identified and to encourage a learning culture amongst the independent chairs.
- Peer supervision amongst the ICs will continue to ensure practice is led by best practice principles, research, guidance and legislation.
- Chairs are well represented in relation to Signs of Safety as practice leads. Close working relationships are in place and chairs help to deliver training in this area.

Challenge and Dispute Resolution

- The midway review process has been formalised so there is a standardised approach to case files being audited between child care reviews, to ensure any drift and delay or challenges with care planning are identified and addressed.
- This year the midway form and the child care outcome form will be reviewed with the practice development leads. The focus will be to ensure the form encourages SMART care planning, making it clear that all areas of the IRO is statutorily required to review are considered.

- Independent Chairs are linked to the regional network and will ensure that updates and current ideology are shared and considered.
- Themes and trends identified as part of the dispute resolution process will continue to be presented to Performance Management Meetings.
- The dispute resolution process has been reviewed and it well utilised to ensure drift and delay in care planning is robustly challenged.
- Chairs will continue to be linked to operational teams to promote good communication and working relationships.
- Issues raised with individual teams will be discussed at monthly team meetings.
- Chairs will promote the savings of children and young people and ensure that finances are accounted for including DLA, savings and inheritance.

Participation and Engagement

- Advocacy has been a focus this year and will continue to be a focus over the next 12 months, to ensure all children have access to an independent advocate so their wishes and feelings are integral to the care planning.
- Chairs will continue to work closely with Social Work colleagues to ensure that children and their families can fully participate in childcare reviews and attend as appropriate.
- Chairs will work closely with the participation service to develop more effective ways of gathering feedback.
- Chairs will continue to be involved in events to celebrate the achievements of children in care.
- Chairs will continue to work closely with those advocating on behalf of children and young people and promote the involvement of an independent person where appropriate.
- Letters to children will continue to be sent and IC's will review regularly at team meetings and peer supervision, sharing examples of good practice and helpful feedback.

Achieving Permanence

- The Service Manager for Safeguarding will chair and attend permanency tracking panels along with operational managers and senior managers and will challenge where there is drift and delay.
- The permanence planning process has been reviewed and there is a new framework to ensure the quality-of-care plans, to tackle any drift and delay and to increase senior management oversight of the plans in place. This includes 5 panels for 5 different cohorts; S20, new IROs, unmatched full care orders, children on track for adoption and children placed with parents under care orders.
- The pre-birth policy has launched which ensures the right plans are in place for those children who may become LAC upon birth.

- The Independent Chairs will ensure specific reference is made to the care plan for permanency in all cases. This will include all available options for cases in proceedings where the care plan has yet to be agreed by the court.
- The Independent Chair will remain aspirational for all looked after children and will consider permanency options including adoption for children of all ages.
- Where there is consideration for children and young people to return to family the Independent Chair will ensure a robust assessment is completed resulting in an appropriate transition plan, so the move is managed safely and is in the child's best interests.
- The Independent Chair will work closely with Social Workers to ensure that Children and Families Assessments are routinely updated for looked after children as appropriate.

Improving the efficacy of Disruption Meetings

- Disruption meetings will continue to be allocated to Independent Chair and key people will be invited to contribute.
- Recommendations from disruption meetings will be circulated to attendees and shared with adoption and fostering panels.
- An anonymised learning bulletin will be produced and circulated to operational staff to ensure that practice takes account of lessons learned.
- Themes and trends identified in disruption meetings will be collated annually.

Contribution to Quality Assurance

- The planned service review considered how the Independent Chair's can contribute to the development and learning of the wider work force.
- There is an expectation that there will be a continued commitment to undertake monthly case file audits or observations of practice.
- Monitoring forms will be completed after all childcare reviews.
- Feedback will be sought from attendees at all childcare reviews and further discussion will take place with colleagues from Quality Assurance about how to enhance the feedback.
- Independent Chair will continue to work closely with the Fostering Team and Fostering Panel to offer constructive feedback for the household reviews.
- Independent Chairs will continue to present complex data to Performance Management Meetings on a quarterly basis.
- Independent Chairs will continue to work alongside colleagues in performance to ensure that data is appropriate and accurate and that it contributes to improving standards for children and young people.
- Themes and trends will be discussed at monthly team meetings as a regular agenda item. Specific areas will be brought to peer meetings and supervision.

