

<b>4 January 2023</b>		<b>ITEM: 7</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> N/A	
<b>Report of:</b> Ruth Murdock, Strategic Lead of Quality Assurance and Reviewing Trevor Willis Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing		
<b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director, Children's Services		
<b>This report is public</b>		

## Executive Summary

The purpose of this document is to meet the statutory requirement for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

This document should be read in conjunction with the *“Thurrock Children's Services, Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report”* for 2021 – 2022 (see Appendix 1)

### 1. Recommendation(s)

#### 1.1 For the Corporate Parenting Committee to review and comment on the IRO Annual report 2021 - 2022 and the recommendations in the report.

### 2. Introduction and Background

#### 2.1 The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under S.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

The IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including:

- promoting the voice of the child
- ensuring that plans for Children Looked After are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuineresponse to each child's needs
- making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one

- offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for Children Looked After and the delivery of services to them; and
- monitoring the activity of the Local Authority as a Corporate Parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands

2.2 During the reporting period, the Thurrock IRO Service has remained stable; there have been no changes of personnel. The Service comprises of five permanent Independent Reviewing Officers.

The average caseload for IROs is 60 – with a variance between 58 and 61.

During the performance year April 2021 – March 2022, the IRO Service conducted a total of 933 reviews. This is an increase of 69 reviews (7.9%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, improved during the year, with the final average being 100% of reviews held within timescales; an increase of 1.6% when compared to last year.

This year, children and young people participated in person, or through an advocate, or by another means by providing their views in the majority of reviews. Only 1.7% of reviews were conducted (for children over the age of 4) where they did not attend nor send their views. Children and young people are encouraged to feed back their views by the 'Mind of My Own' App alongside speaking with their carers, allocated social workers and IRO.

For the period April 2021 to March 2022, 99.1% of review reports were completed within timescale by the IRO's.

2.3 Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

Section 8 of the main report provides a detailed analysis of the characteristics of children moving through the Care System in Thurrock.

Key points from this are:

- The monthly breakdown for the numbers of children looked after has remained relatively stable and consistent throughout the year ranging from 308 to 294. The rate of Looked After Children per 10,000 for March 2022 represents 65 children per 10,000, this is in line with national data and slightly below statistical neighbours. (66 per 10,000)
- The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children has risen by 4 to 28 (representing 9.5% of the total cohort) as of March 2022

when compared to the same period in 2021.

- The number of children adopted has remained the same as last year (8 children).
- There are more boys Looked After in Thurrock than girls (61% and 39% respectively)
- Black British children are not overrepresented in the looked after population at 12% (2022 figures) which compares to the school census data (2020) of 14%, although children from mixed/dual heritage backgrounds are 9% compared to the school census data of 6.3%
- The majority of children looked after are subject to legal orders at 77% which compares to national data (78%) and shows a desire to achieve permanence and stability for children
- 66.4% of Children Looked After live within 20 miles of their home address. The complex needs of some children results in it not being possible to find local placements. The majority of children not placed in Thurrock are placed in neighbouring boroughs of Essex, Greater London or Kent

#### 2.4 Feedback from Children and Young People about their care plans

At a recent involvement event a number of young people were asked about their plans. 47% knew what the plan was for them and their family, 60% felt involved in making the plan and 76% thought the plan would help make things better.

IROs continue to look at creative and interactive ways of involving children and young people, including how reviews are recorded in a more accessible and personal format.

### 3 Issues Options and Analysis of Options

None

### 4 Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To inform members of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service during 2021-2022. The report also updates members with the recommended work plan for the IRO service during 2022 – 2023.

### 5 Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

Not Applicable

## **6 Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community**

Not Applicable

## **7 Implications**

### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **David May**  
**Strategic Lead Finance**

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**  
**Interim Deputy Head of Legal**

Section 118 Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the concept Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). Since 2004 all Local Authorities have been required to appoint IROs. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extends the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to child's review to monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to a child's case as set out in sections 25A - 25C of the Children Act 1989. The intention is that IRO's should have an effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process. The IRO Handbook provides clear guidance on the IROs' role in and processes around the case review. The IRO Handbook is statutory guidance and includes the requirement that an annual report is produced for the Corporate Parenting Panel covering the matters set out in paragraph 7.11 of that document.

The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England)(Amendment) Regulations 2021, which amended the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) 2010, from 9<sup>th</sup> September 2021 prohibits children under 16 being placed in 'other arrangements' save in some very limited circumstances. In essence, a child under 16 must be placed with a parent or other connected person, a foster parent or in a registered children's home otherwise the placement is unlawful.

### **7.3 Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**  
**Team Manager Community Development and Equalities**

An overview of the profile and diversity of children and young people in care in Thurrock is set out in section 2.3 of this report.

The Service is committed to practice which promotes inclusion and diversity, and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy. Members of the service represent diverse backgrounds and heritage and are able to promote equality and diversity.

- 7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

Not Applicable

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Not Applicable

**9. Appendices to the report**

- Appendix 1 - IRO Annual Report 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021

**Report Author:**

Trevor Willis  
Service Manager Safeguarding, Reviewing and Child Protection

Ruth Murdock  
Strategic Lead Quality Assurance and Reviewing

**Thurrock Children's Services  
Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**01 April 2021 – 31 March 2022**

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## 1. Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to meet the statutory requirement (IRO Handbook 2010) for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Where possible, this Report refers to Children Looked After (CLA) which reflects the views and wishes of children and young people in Thurrock about their own identity and the way in which they prefer to be referred to by professionals.

## 2. Reporting period

This report covers the period from April 2022 to March 2023.

## 3. The Legal, Statutory and National context of the IRO role

- 3.1 The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
- 3.2 In March 2010 the IRO Handbook was issued, providing Local Authorities with statutory guidance on how the IROs should discharge their duties. Significantly, the Handbook stated:

*The IRO has a new role conferred upon them to monitor the child's case as opposed to monitoring the review, effectively monitoring the implementation of the Care Plan between reviews (at para. 3.74)*

The Handbook goes on to state that the primary role of an IRO is:

*To ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child (at para. 2.10)*

- 3.3 In discharging this role, the Handbook notes (at para. 2.14) that the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including:
- *promoting the voice of the child*
  - *ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment; are up to date; effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs;*
  - *making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one;*
    - *offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for children looked after and the delivery of services to them; and*



- *monitoring the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands*

#### **4. Local context – Thurrock Council as a Corporate Parent**

4.1 As a Corporate Parent, the Council is ambitious to ensure that children achieve the best possible outcomes while in the care of the authority. We aim wherever possible for children to be cared for either within their own family or wider networks. However, when it is felt that this is not a safe or suitable option all efforts are made to find children a long term permanent home.

The IRO service plays a key role in monitoring and supporting plans to achieve this ambition.

#### **5. Thurrock Council IRO Service**

- 5.1 During 2021/22, staffing within the IRO services has remained stable. There have been no periods of prolonged absence or sickness. The service continues to comprise of five, permanent full-time members of staff.
- 5.2 All five IROs working for the Service are qualified Social Workers registered with Social Work England and subject to regular Disclosure and Barring Service enhanced checks. All have relevant and appropriate skills, bringing to the role specialist knowledge and experience-
- 5.3 There are two female and three male IRO's and the IRO's come from diverse backgrounds, ensuring young people in our care can be allocated to IRO's across a range of diverse groups.
- 5.4 All five of the IROs act independently of Thurrock Social Care and are not involved in preparation of children in care plans or the management of children in care cases or have any control over resources allocated to a case.
- 5.5 There have been no complaints received about the IRO service and conduct of the CLA reviews.

#### **6. IRO Caseload and Service Performance**

##### **6.1 IRO caseloads**

	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/2020</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>
Average caseload	62	60	60	59

Caseload range	44-68	57-62	58-61	57-61
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6.2 The average IRO caseload has been consistent in the past four years with a caseload average of 59 children and young people. This is in line with the IRO handbook which states that an average IRO caseload should be between 50 - 70 children and young people for a full-time post (FTE). Children and young people's circumstance and situations vary in complexity, and the distance which needs to be travelled to placements. Children who are recently accommodated, placed at distance, involved in care proceedings or have placement disruption require a higher level of scrutiny and oversight than children who are in long term settled foster placements.

6.3 IRO's may also have additional responsibilities which are shared amongst the team in addition to chairing reviews, such as sitting on, and advising on panel supporting the delivery of training.

## 7. Number of Child and Young Person in Care Reviews

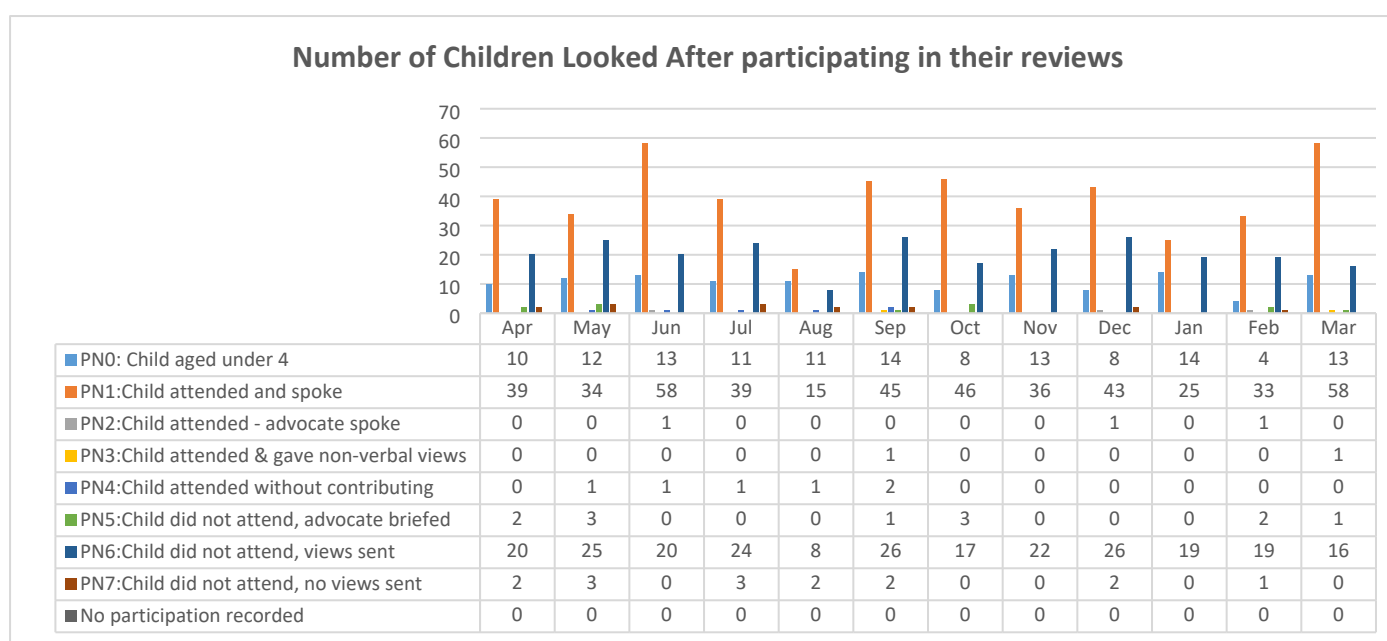
	2021									2022			Year to Date
Due in month	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Total held	74	91	96	79	42	96	80	74	82	67	55	97	933
Total held In timescale	74	91	96	79	42	96	80	74	82	67	55	97	933
Percentage of total held in timescale	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Held In quarter	261			217			236			219			933
Percentage held in timescale	100%			100%			100%			100%			Average 100%

During the performance year April 2021 – March 2022, the IRO service conducted a total of 933 reviews. This is an increase of 69 reviews (An increase of 7.9%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, improved during the year, with the final average being 100% of reviews held within timescales an increase of 1.6% when compared to last year.

The high performance in this area is due to the work of the whole team including Business Support as well as the IRO's in ensuring that reviews are held within

timescales. Reviews are booked at five months to accommodate any unforeseen issues that arise or the need to change the date of a review to meet the needs and requirements of the child or young person.

## 7.1 Children and Young People’s Participation in Reviews



Ensuring that each review fully represents the views of the child is important and that children and young people are encouraged wherever appropriate, to take part in their reviews. From the data above, it is clear that the vast majority of reviews were attended by children and they spoke for themselves. This reflects the proactive approach taken by the IRO service in ensuring that the child remain at the centre of every meeting. There are, however, occasions where children are either unable or unwilling to attend their meetings and therefore efforts are made by the IRO’s to ensure that the children’s views are explored and shared at the meeting. Often this is done through the use of the Mind of My Own app and through face-to-face visits or phone conversations.

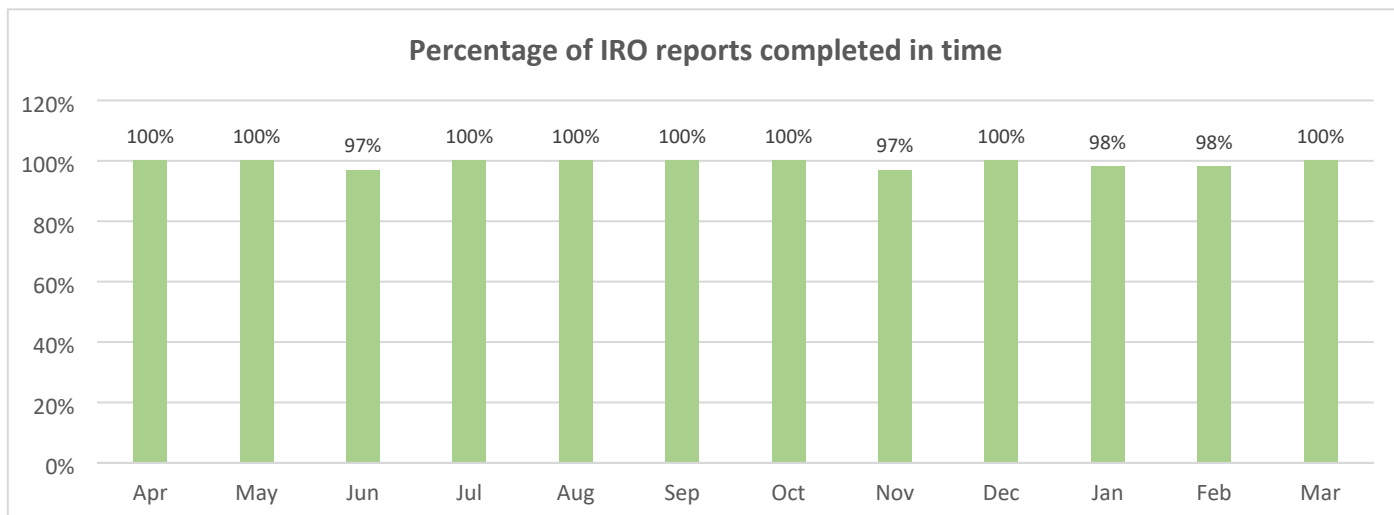
Whilst children and young people are given the option to attend their meeting, their attendance is not mandatory. Therefore, the IRO service continues to look at creative ways to gather the views of children and young people in a meaningful way. This involves offering children a number of ways to share their views in a manner that suits them. Whilst most children are keen to see their IRO face to face, there has been an increase (particularly with older young people) for their IRO to contact them over TEAMS on a video call. There remains an appetite for IRO’s to engage with children and young people in more creative ways, utilising all resources available to them.

<b>C &amp; YP Participation in Reviews</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>	<b>2021-22</b>
Child aged under 4	100	142	151	131
Child attended and spoke	372	439	459	471
Child attended - advocate spoke	3	10	0	3
Child attended & gave non-verbal views	2	0	0	2
Child attended without contributing	5	14	10	6
Child did not attend, advocate briefed	3	59	20	12
Child did not attend, views sent	159	163	209	242
Child did not attend, no views sent	103	40	15	15
No participation recorded	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>747</b>	<b>867</b>	<b>864</b>	<b>882</b>

The performance over the last four years indicates a consistently increasing number of children and young people participating in their meeting and expressing their views.

The IROs ensure that both parents, where possible, are consulted and invited to the review. The parent's views are taken into account in the review meeting and they receive a copy of the record, where appropriate.

## 7.2 Completion of Review Reports between March 21 to April 22.



On completion of the child's review the IRO is expected to complete a report on the child's electronic file. The report provides a note of the review and its discussions, and the recommendation made in the review. There is an expectation that review outcome reports are completed and distributed to young people, parents and professionals within 20 working days of the review.

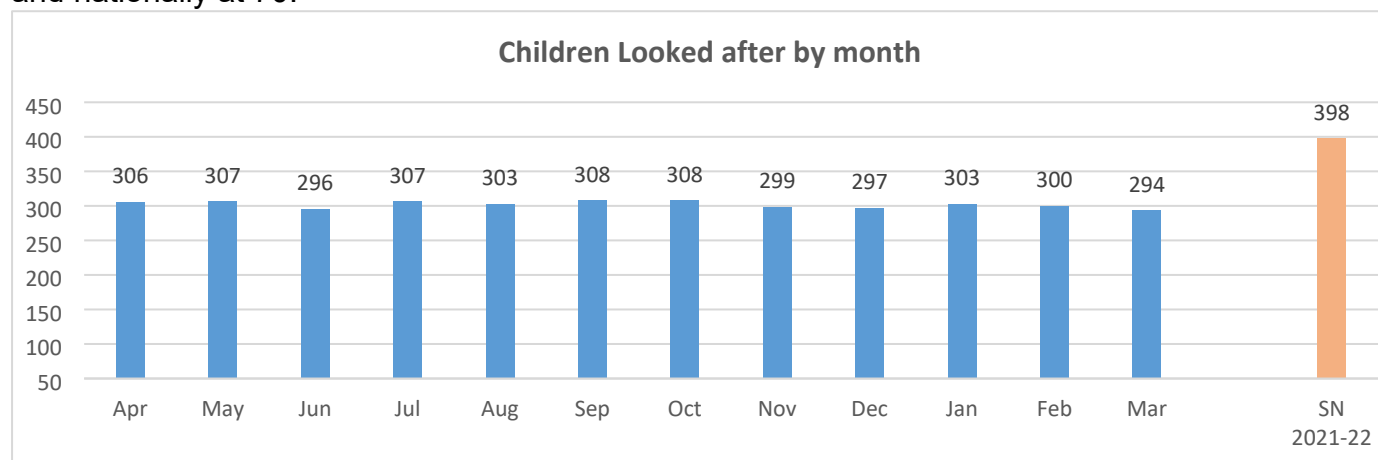
The number of reviews completed within timescale for the period April 2020 March 2021 range between 97 - 100% and on average 99.1% of reports were completed within timescale an increase of 1.5% when compared to last year. It is important that reports are completed within time scales and provided to young people. Timeliness of reports is regularly scrutinised by the service manager and where appropriate issues of late reports are brought to the attention of the IRO and acted on as a priority.

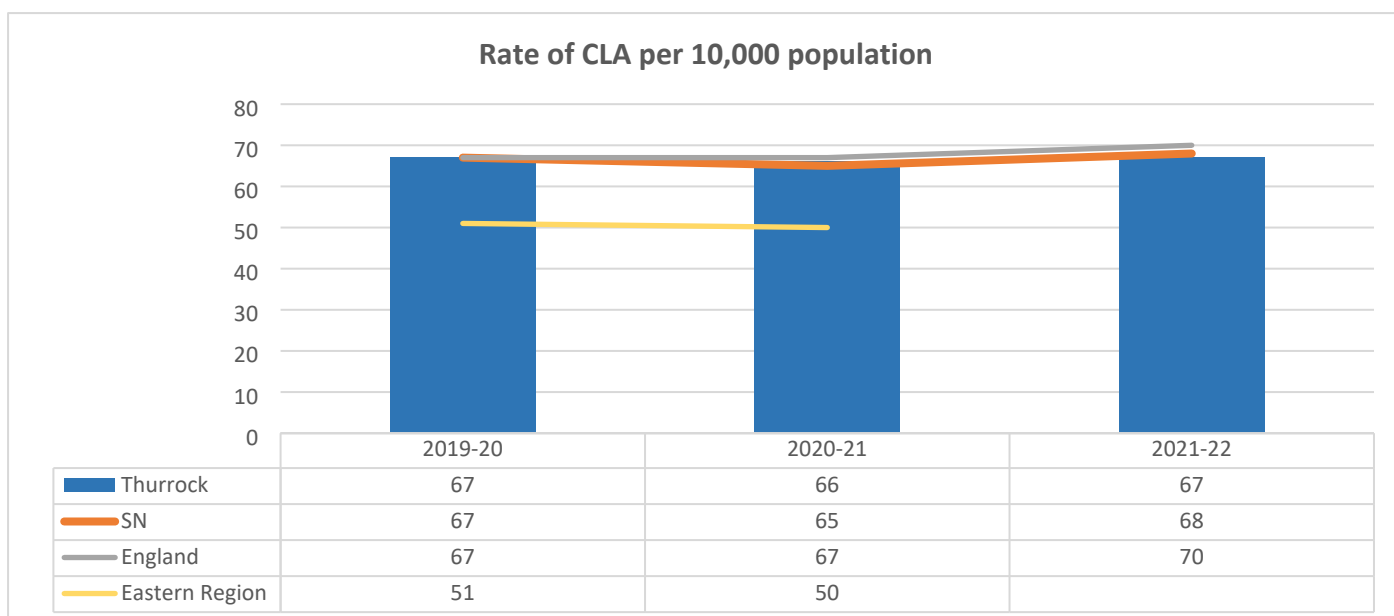
The review process is supported by an efficient and professional business support unit and the IROs ensure that they visit or speak to children/ young people and will discuss how they experienced the review meeting and how/where they would like it conducted.

## 8. Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

### 8.1 Numbers of Children in Care

Thurrock's number of children looked after is at the lower end of the statistical neighbour average. The monthly breakdown for the numbers of children looked after has remained relatively stable and consistent throughout the year ranging between 294 and 308. The rate of Children Looked After at the end of March 2022 per 10,000 of the child population was 67 which is in line with statistical neighbour at 68 and nationally at 70.



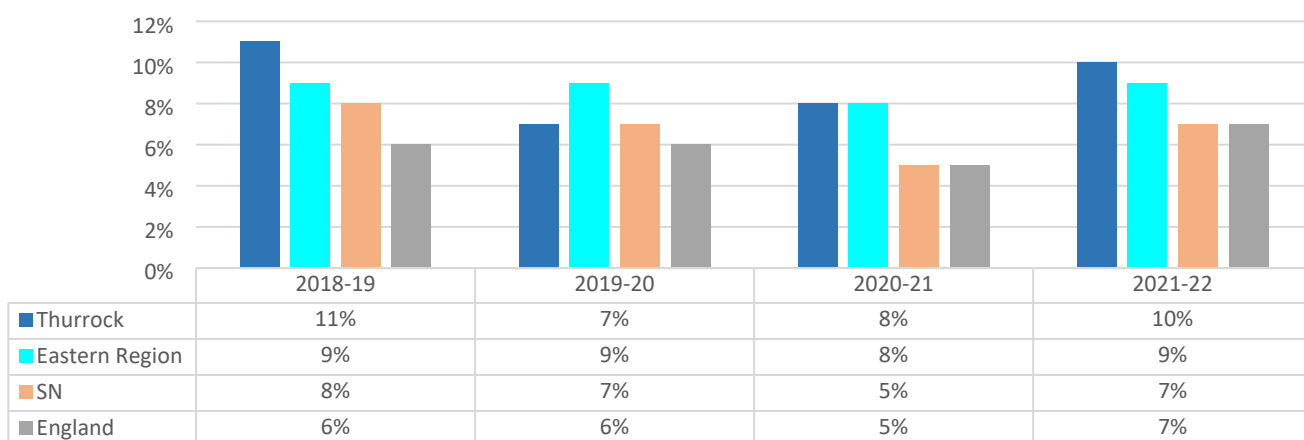


Total numbers compared to last year have dropped by 1.3% compared to 1% for statistical neighbours.

	Year end				
	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Total cohort	308	293	298	298	294
Rate per 10,000 population	72	68	67	67	65
Number of UASC	32	30	20	24	28
Adopted	7	13	14	8	8

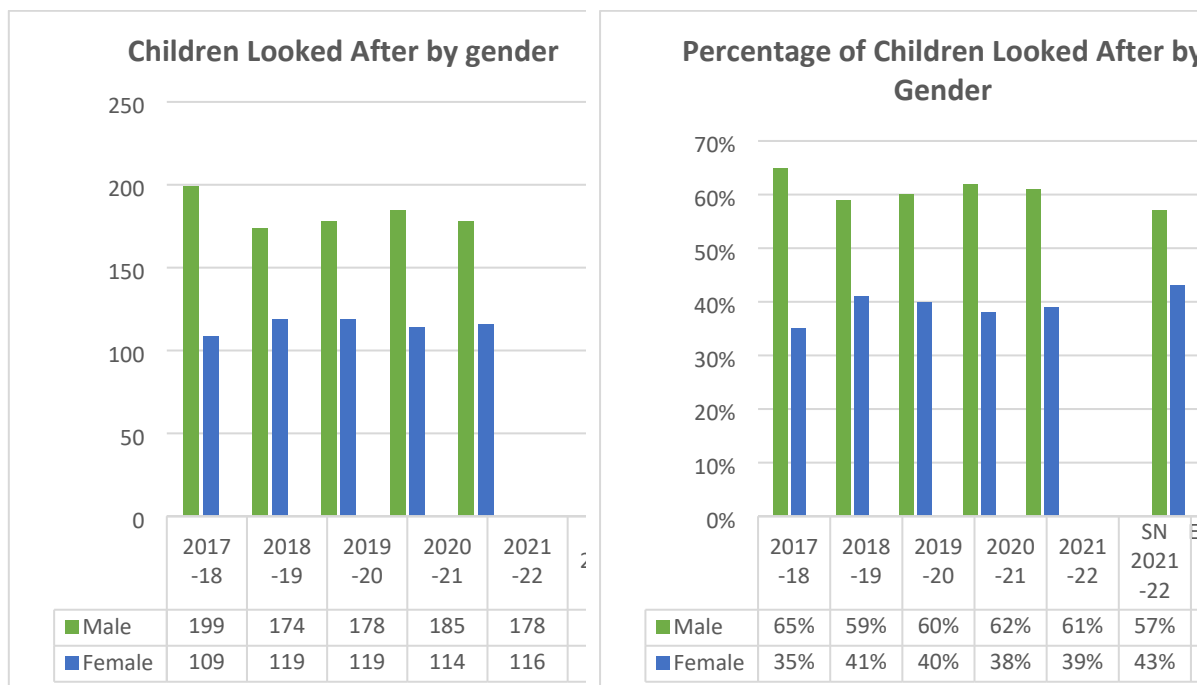
The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children rose by 4 young people at the end of March 2022 (representing 10% of the total cohort) when compared to the same period in the previous year and is above statistical neighbour, regional neighbours and national numbers.

### % of children looked after at year end who are Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children



The number of children adopted has stayed the same. Nationally there has been a 3% rise in Adoption Orders. (Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board - Headline Measures Q4 2021-2022). Given this small increase we would expect the adoption numbers in Thurrock to be similar. The local authority continues to explore adoption as a parallel plan for all children under the age of ten. Continued scrutiny is provided by the IRO service to see whether any delay is avoidable

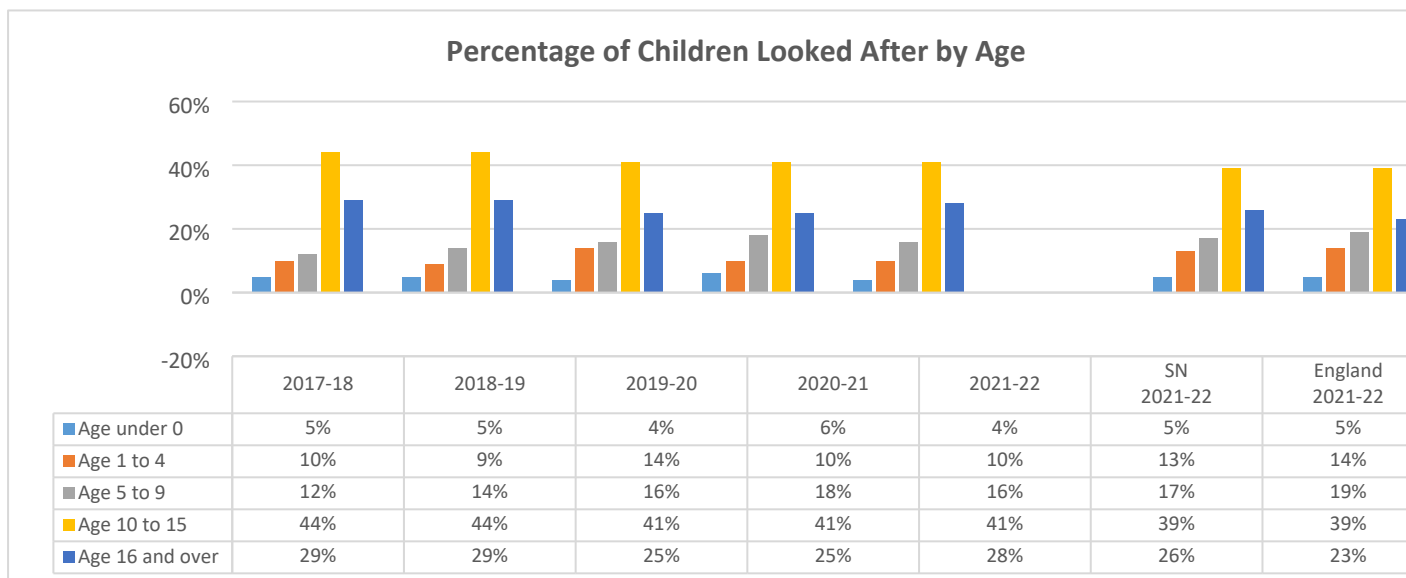
### 8.2 Gender of Children and Young People in Care



The number of males in care continues to exceed the number of females. Figures for 2022 indicated that 61% of children in care were male, whilst 39% were female. This



is most likely due to the number of UASC, the majority of which are males and at the end of March were 10% of our total CLA figure.



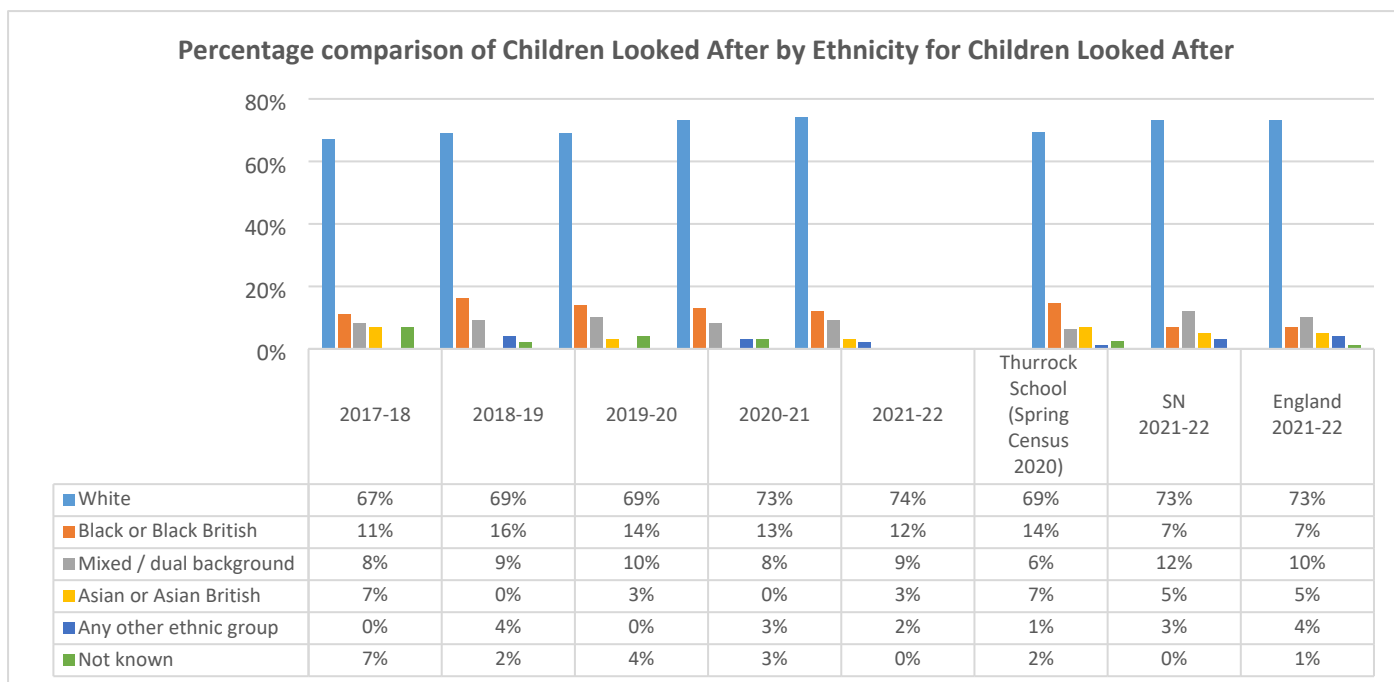
The age distribution of children looked after continues to see children in the 12 to 15-year-old age bracket represent the largest proportion of children looked after.

The numbers of children looked after in the 16 to 17-year-old age bracket is the only range that has increased when compared to last year. This is likely down to a larger proportion of young people turning 16 within the year, however changes within the age brackets are very slight.

### 8.3 Ethnicity of Children and Young People in Care

Identity is a core factor considered within the dimensions on developmental need (Care Planning Guidance 2015). This concerns the child's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. It is important for a child who is in care to know who they are and where they have come from, and to understand, as far as they are able, why they are being cared for away from home. Race, religion, age, gender, sexuality and disability all contribute to a child's sense of identity, as well as feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups. The importance of understanding who we are and where we come from is recognised in good social work practice, for example through undertaking life story work or other direct work.

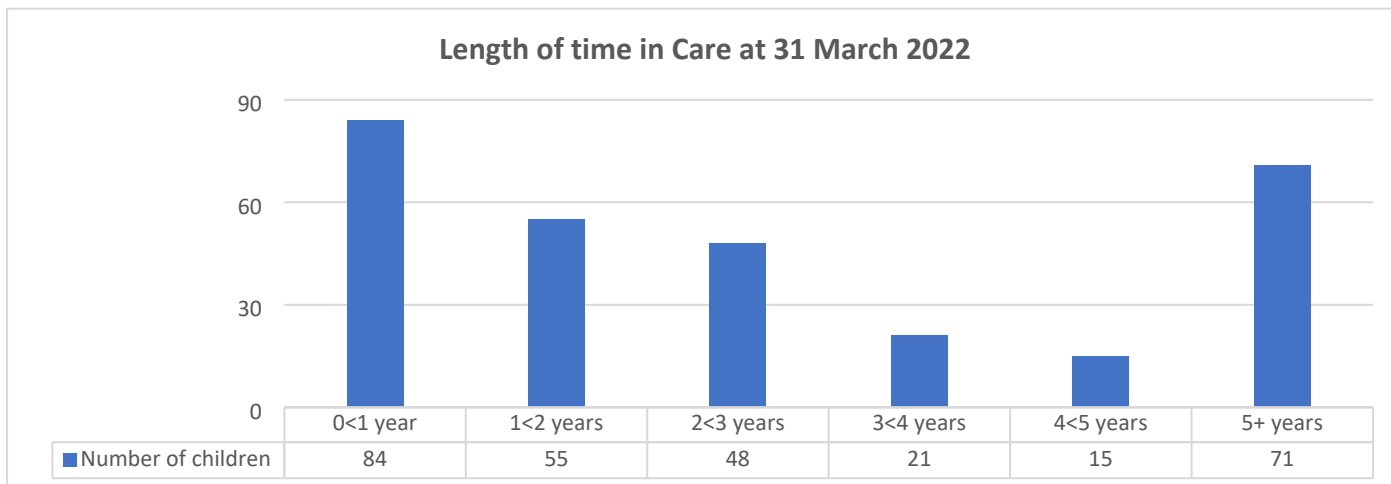
Racial and cultural identity is an important aspect of identity for many Children Looked After. The assessment of each individual child's needs alongside the child's own views will determine the actions which should be put into the care plan to ensure that they are able to develop a strong sense of identity and self-esteem. This will act not only as a strong protective factor against unhealthy risk-taking behaviours but enable the child to maximise their talents. Disabled children may also need particular help in developing a positive sense of identity in the face of negative public stereotypes about disability.



The recorded information regarding the demographics of the ethnicity of children and young people Looked after has shown little or no change on a yearly basis with children who are recorded to come from a “White” background representing the vast majority of children Looked After in Thurrock in Thurrock (74%) which is in line with the rest of England. When comparing data over the past 5 years there has been little change in the demographics relating to the ethnicity of the children in care in Thurrock.

The percentages of Black or Black British children in care in Thurrock is 12%. This figure is significantly higher when comparing to the Statistical Neighbour and National average of 7% but in line with the demographics of the population in Thurrock compared to statistical neighbours and national data. The schools census 2020 (which is the most recent information) indicated that 14% of the children living in Thurrock were Black or Black British, compared to 7% for the National and Statistical Neighbour averages. This data is also likely influenced by the number of UASC in Thurrock which accounted for 10% of the CLA population at the end of March 2022 and 57% (16) of the UASC population were described as Black.

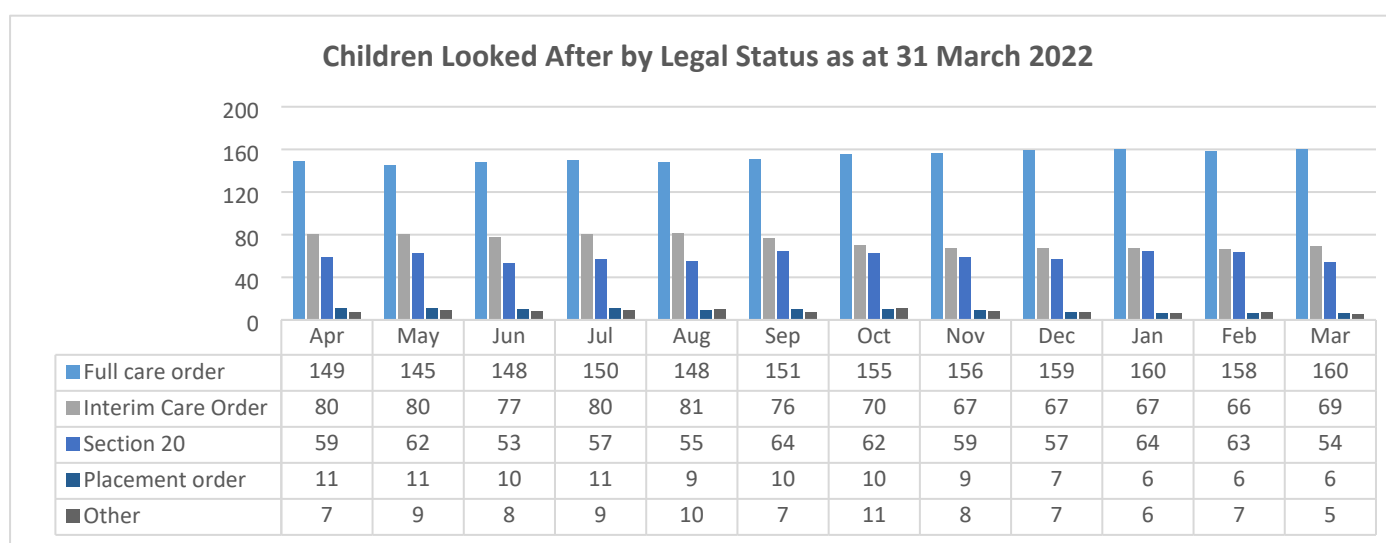
## 8.4 Time in Care for Children and Young People



It is recognised that the best place for children is within the care of their families, if this is safe. The longer that children remain in care the more problematic it becomes for them to return to the care of their families. It is therefore important that the IRO service continue to scrutinise the care plans that are put in place for children and young people to ensure that planning does not drift and that children do not remain in care for any longer than is necessary.

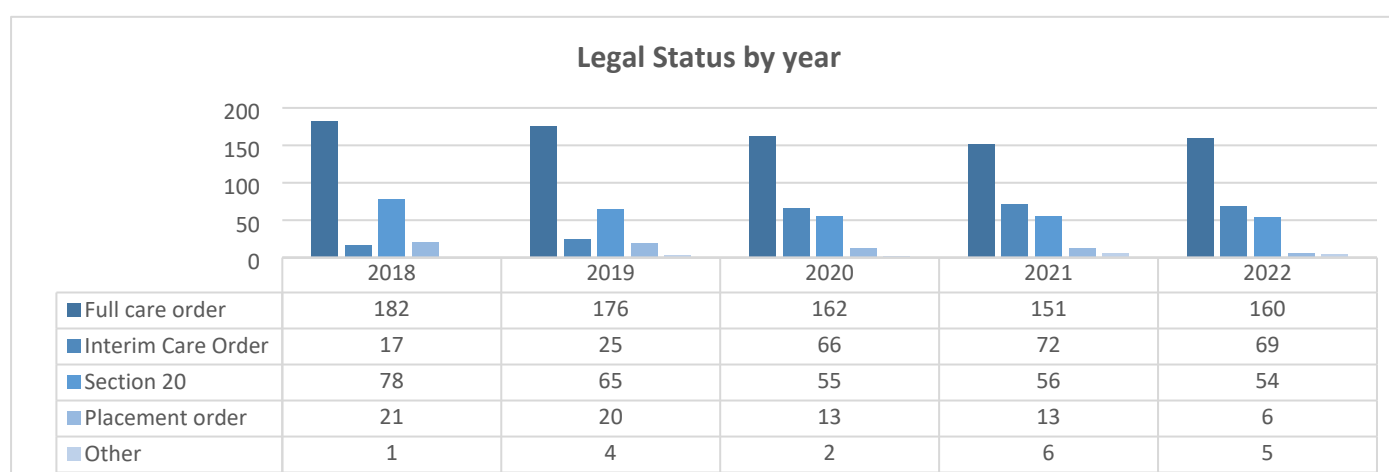
Where children have been in care for longer than five years it is important that the IRO's closely scrutinise the care plan that has been developed for the young person and explore whether there are more appropriate ways of ensuring permanency for a young person, working with foster carers to explore the possibility of an SGO where children have been in placement for a long time.

## 8.5 Legal Framework for Children in Care



According to the latest benchmarking data in 2021-22, nationally 78% of Children Looked After were cared for under a Care Order (Full or Interim Care Order), 17% under Section 20, and 5% on a Placement Order. Statistical neighbours showed similar data with 76% of Children Looked After were cared for under a Care Order (Full or Interim Care Order), 17% under Section 20, and 7% on a Placement Order.

Data for Thurrock shows 77% of children cared for under a Care Order, 18% under Section 20, and 4% on a Placement Order. The majority of Children Looked After by Thurrock are, or have been, subject to legal proceedings where they have suffered some form of abuse or neglect and the accommodation is being used to protect them from further harm and to secure permanency for these children.

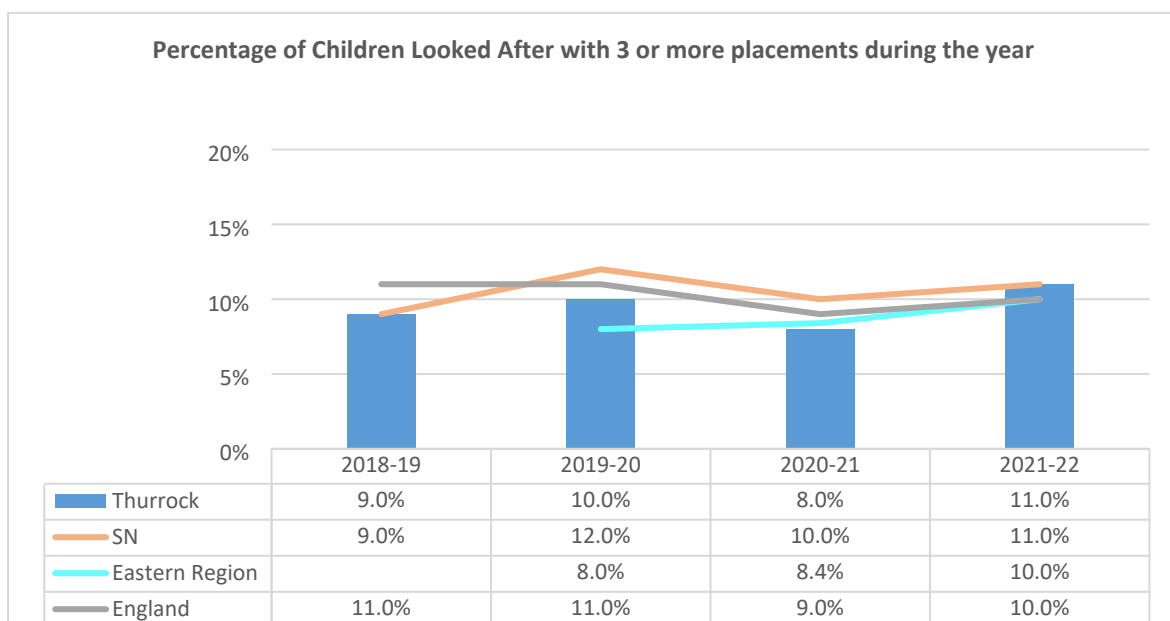


It is important that wherever possible any form of intervention that is offered to families is done so at the lowest possible level. Section 20 agreements allow the local authority to place a child in care with parental agreement. The threshold that must be crossed for a Full or Interim Care Order to be granted is contained within

S31 of the Children Act. The Court may grant an Interim Care Order if it has reasonable grounds to believe that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, or a Full Care Order if the child is, or is continuing to suffer significant harm. This harm must be due to the care being provided to the child by his parents, or because the child is beyond parental control. Under S20 of the Children Act, parents have the right to remove their child from the placement, which may result in a level of insecurity and instability for children. The use of care orders continues to exceed the use of section 20 requests for children looked after. This pattern indicates that there is a desire to achieve permanency and stability for children. Since 2020 the number of children on interim care orders has exceeded the number of children placed under section 20. It is suggested that this is a further indication of the desire for children looked after in the Thurrock area to have stability and security when it comes to their future and their placements.

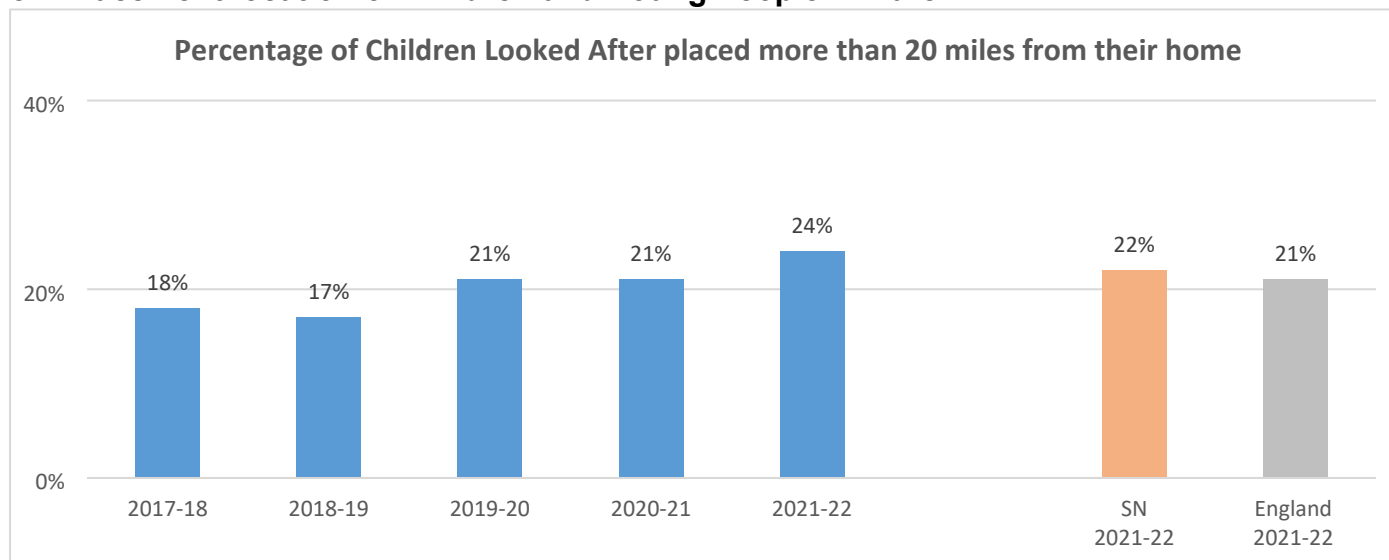
The challenge for the IRO service continues to be one that ensures that the plans that are developed for children are carried out within reasonable time scales and that the legal framework that children are placed under does not have an impact upon the stability that is required to allow them to achieve successful outcomes.

### 8.6 Placement Stability of Children and Young People in Care



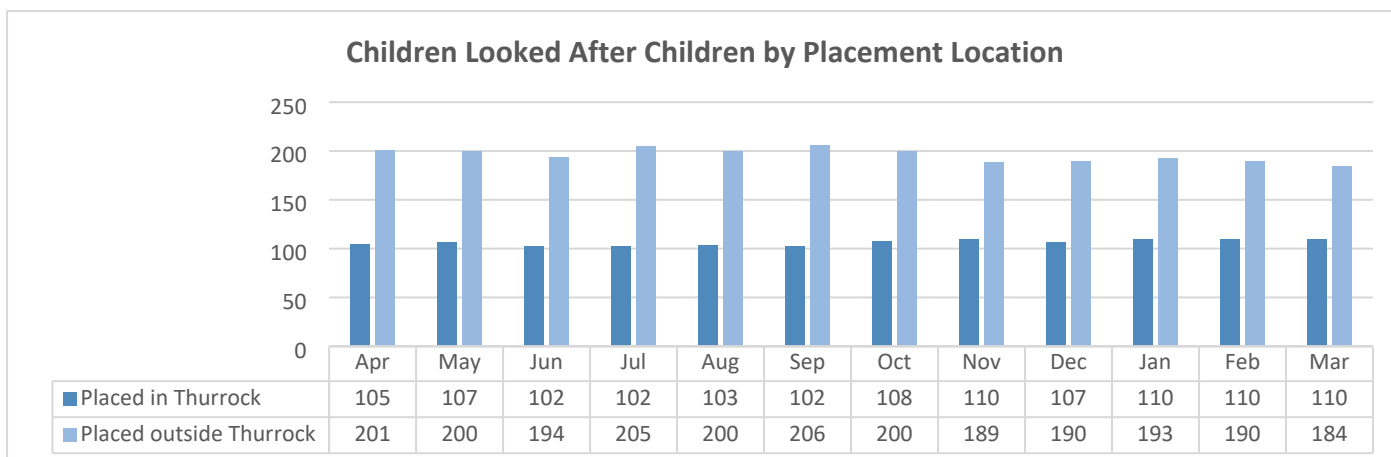
The percentage of children who have had three or more placements in the year 2021 to 2022 has increased by 2.6% and at 11% is in line with statistical neighbours and slightly higher than the Eastern Region and National performance at 10%. It is not conducive for children to experience a number of placements and the security and stability provided by a consistent placement provides children with regular access to education friendship groups and local amenities as well as provides him with the opportunity to build positive relationships with carers. Nationally there is a shortage of placements available particularly for children with complex needs. Thurrock is working towards increasing the number of placements locally which are able to meet these needs.

### 8.7 Placement location of Children and Young People in Care

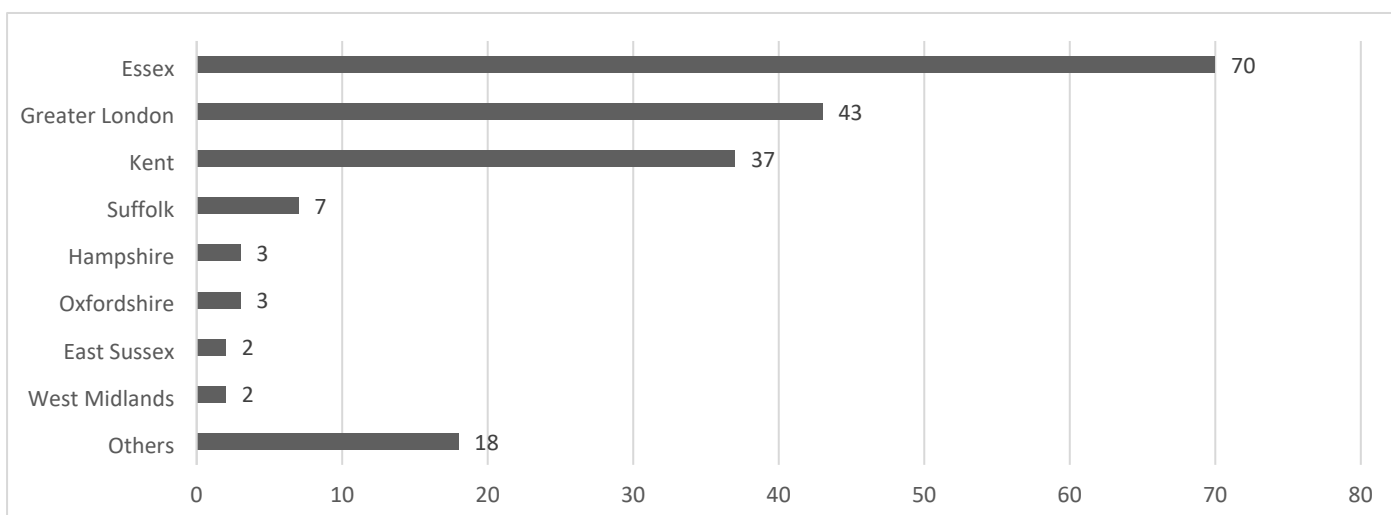


The number of children placed more than 20 miles away from their home has risen by 4.4%. The service recognises the need for every effort to be made to place children as close to their home as possible so far is consistent with the need to be safeguarded as well as to ensure that they have continued access to specialist therapeutic services what education provision.

Consideration needs to be given to the number of available services with in Thurrock that have the capacity to meet the complex needs of children coming into the care system as well as the need for some of these young people to be placed a significant distance away from Thurrock to ensure their safety and continued development combined with a national shortage of placements resulting in fewer options available to the service.



The IRO service recognises that where possible children and young people need to remain within the Thurrock area, close to their family, schools and friends. There are however, occasions where children need to be placed outside of Thurrock, because of the need for a specialist placement that meets the complex needs of the child or young person, for their own safety or simply because of availability within the local area.

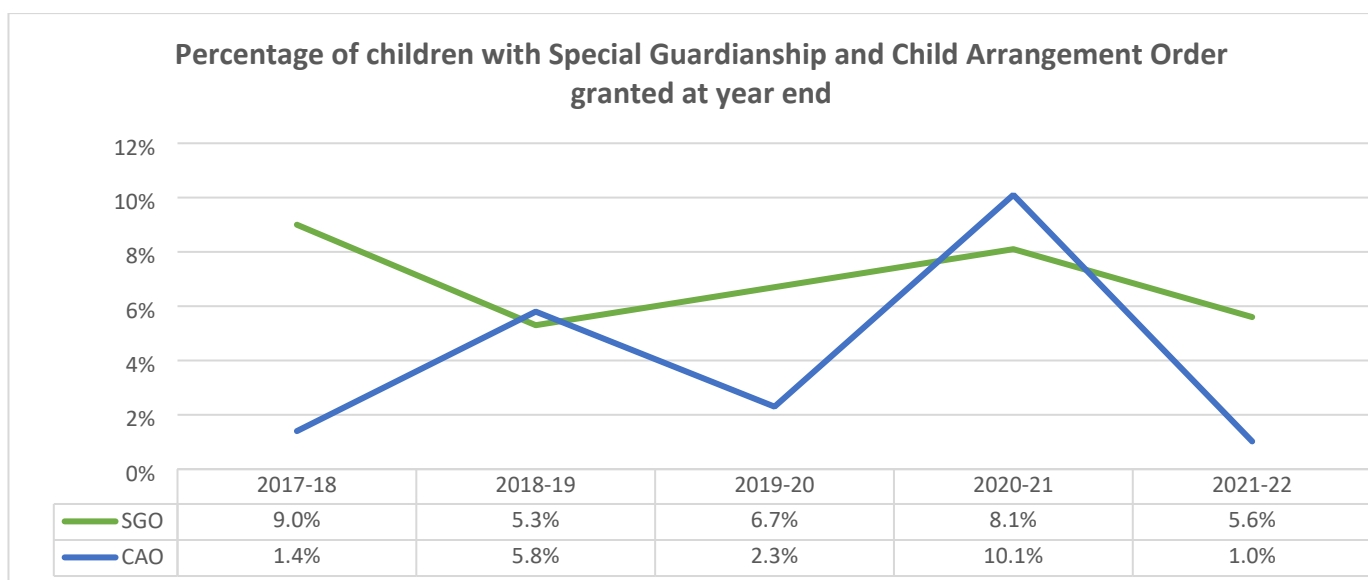


Most children and young people are placed within Essex, Greater London and Kent and children and young people in these placements are regularly reviewed and scrutinised in order to ensure that their needs continue to be met.

## 9. Use of Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is an order appointing one or more individual to be a child's 'special guardian'. It is a private law order made under the Children Act 1989 and is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from a legally secure placement.

It is a more secure order than a Child Arrangements Order (CAO) because a parent cannot apply to discharge it unless they have the permission of the court to do so, however it is less secure than an Adoption Order because it does not end the legal relationship between the child and his/her birth parents. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced Special Guardianship Orders. Both an SGO and CAO are routes to permanence for children.



Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders can be used when looking placing a child away from parents with friends or family members and offer a child a more “normal” childhood experience. They are also used to convert long-term fostering arrangements, providing for a higher degree of commitment from the carer and long-term permanency for children.

5.6% of children left care through a Special Guardianship Order representing a decrease of 2.5% when compared to last year and contrasts with national figures that saw an overall rise of 6%. There has been a significant decrease in the number of CAO granted, however scrutiny of these figures indicates that there are a number of requests still in proceedings that will be recorded in the data for next year.

Because the numbers are relatively small that conclude by way of a CAO small changes in the number can make quite a difference to the percentage share.

The complexity of the needs of children coming into care may mean that a special guardianship order or a child arrangement order is not suitable however it is important that the IRO service continues to robustly scrutinise the situation of each child and young person to ensure that children and young people do not remain in care unnecessarily however do experience stability and security.

## **10. IRO Service impact on the Outcomes for Children and Young People**



## **Dispute Resolutions and Escalation**

One of the key functions of an IRO is to oversee the needs and rights of every young person in the care of the Local Authority. This responsibility is outlined in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2015 and IRO Handbook 2010. Every child in care has an Independent Reviewing Officer appointed to ensure that their Care Plan fully reflects their needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the Local Authority's legal responsibilities towards them as a child or young person in care.

An IRO will ensure that the wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration by the Local Authority throughout the whole time the child is in care and will monitor the performance of the Local Authority in relation to the child's case. On occasions this means that it will come to the attention of the IRO that there is a problem in relation to the care of a child or young person, for example in relation to planning for the care of the child, or the implementation of the plan or decisions relating to it, resource issues or poor practice by the Social Worker. When this happens, the IRO is required to seek a resolution.

It is acknowledged that the resolution of disputes can be time consuming and can create tensions between the IRO and the Local Authority. Nevertheless, the child's allocated IRO is personally responsible for activating and seeking a resolution, even if it may not be in accordance with the child's wishes and feelings if, in the IRO's view, it is in accordance with the best interest and welfare of the child, as well as his or her human rights. In compliance with the IRO Handbook 2010 there is in place a formal Dispute Resolution Process whilst acknowledging and giving primacy to informal resolution where possible.

Thurrock's IRO's manage most disagreement and challenge very effectively and on an informal basis. In most of the cases discussion with social workers and their managers is effective in achieving the progress required.

It is recognised that there are occasions when this is not possible and in line with the guidance in the IRO handbook, the IRO will undertake a formal dispute.

The IRO Service recorded, 11 completed dispute resolutions. All the disputes raised were about concerns with regards to the adequate development/progress of the young persons agreed care plan. All of the disputes raised were resolved to the satisfaction of the IRO. IROs continue to attend the placement panel in an advisory capacity and to ensure the IROs views are taken into account in the discussion.

There were no disputes which had to be referred to the Corporate Director of Children Services or CAFCAS.

### **11. Feedback from the Children in Care about the IRO Service.**

The IRO service is proactive in using the Mind of My Own App to gain the views of children as well as seeking their views directly.

Following on from previous years the IRO service were keen to find out about how children and young people feel about their plans. Data was gathered alongside the Participation and Engagement service that indicated that whilst most children felt that their plan would make things better for them just over half either didn't know or sort of knew the plans for them.

	Yes	No	Sort of	Answered by
<b>Do you know what is in the plan for you and your family?</b>	21 (47%)	19 (42%)	5	45
<b>Have you been involved in making the plan?</b>	24 (60%)	14 (35%)	2	40
<b>Do you think the plan will help to make things better?</b>	35 (76%)	2	9 (20%)	46

In light of this information the IRO service has changed the wording of the plans shared at Reviews to use less jargon and use a section "what we agreed we will do" in review reports in the hope that this will make things easier for children and young people to distinguish their plans.

## **12. IRO Service objectives in: 2021-2022**

### **1. To fully embed new ways of presenting minutes from reviews.**

The IRO service recognises that the Review is the child or young person's meeting and continually looks at ways to present minutes in ways that are meaningful and relevant to children and young people. IRO's use a selection of methods ranging from Magazine style minutes, direct letters and formal minutes addressed directly to the young person. IRO's continually share information with each other regarding how minutes are written to learn from each other.

### **2. To utilise new technologies to assist in communicating with, and, conducting reviews for children and young people in line with their views and wishes.**

Most reviews are carried out face to face and the IRO service believes that this is the best way to conduct any meetings. There are instances however when older young people request that meetings are held via Teams. Whilst this may not be ideal it is important to recognise that the meeting is for the young person and if the use of technology assists their participation, then the IRO is keen to embrace this. Where there are situations where the young person's requests a review over Teams the IRO will always try and follow this up with a face to face visit.

**3. To play an active role in the assessment and reduction in the use of unregistered/unregulated placements.**

The IRO service plays an active role in making sure that wherever possible the placements for children and young people are appropriate and registered. There are occasions when children and young people need to be placed in unregistered placement because of an emergency or due to a shortage of availability. Where unregistered placements are used, IRO's exercise extra vigilance to ensure that the placement meets the needs of the young person by undertaking monthly visits as these placements may, on occasion, be in breach of Care Planning guidelines.

**4. To contribute proactively to the transitions process for children and young people on the verge of leaving care.**

The IRO service works closely with frontline services to ensure that young people are prepared for adulthood and leaving care. IRO's are routinely ensuring that transition planning forms part of the Review process and is clearly recorded. There are aspects of the transition process that the IRO service are yet to become familiar with however meetings have taken place to better understand this and it is agreed that IRO's will undertake a further review after the young person's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to ensure that transition plans are in place.

**5. To assist in the development of support packages available to children attending university.**

There were 21 children attending University who were Looked After Children. The IRO service continues to strongly advocate for young people to attend university where appropriate and if they meet the requirements. In discussion with the IRO service the policies surrounding the provision of support for young people attending University is supportive and appropriate.

**6. The IRO service to work with the Participation and Engagement service at the Young Voices Consultation days to obtain specific feedback about what they want from their reviews and IRO and act on this as appropriate.**

The IRO service is currently developing information alongside young people and the participation and engagement service to ensure they are clear regarding the role of the IRO and understand the purpose of the review process. Please also see section 11.

### **13. IRO Service Objectives 2022-2023**

**To contribute proactively to the transitions process for children and young people on the verge of leaving care.** The IRO service will continue to discuss transition planning within the review process for any child over the age of 16, to ensure that transition planning takes place in a timely manner. The IRO service will also look at supporting the Leaving and Aftercare Service by implementing a further review for children after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to ensure that the transition plan is being carried out.

**The IRO will improve representation and participation of service users at CLA Review meetings. The IRO will collect feedback from service users about their LAC Review experience to help improve the LAC Review meetings.** The IRO service has recently implemented a QR code that is attached to the review correspondence provided to young people. It is hoped that analysis of this information in the coming year will allow for the service to be more responsive to the understanding the experience of young people.

**To ensure that there is no delay in the plans for children with regards to long-term linking.** There are discussions within the Review where any child has been in Foster Care for more than a year if long term linking is a plan that can be pursued. The IRO service will ensure that there are clear timescales for this to be completed and that this is checked at the midway reviews and provide the views of the IRO in a timely manner.

**IRO service to strategically support and where necessary challenge & help the CLA service prepare care plans and review reports on time.** The IRO service recognises that there are significant pressures on frontline teams however it is important that plans and reports are provided on time. The IRO service will continue to maintain links with frontline teams and look at ways that they can support teams.

**To take an active role in the provision of training to raise awareness of the role and remit of the IRO.**

The IRO service will explore avenues to make practitioners more aware of the role of the IRO in terms of the Quality Assurance aspect of the position. A request has been made to be included in the induction programme for new starters and the IRO service will continue to build relationships with practitioners by being linked with service areas.