

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

ANNUAL REPORT

1st April 2019 – 31st March 2020

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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 for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Committee, established by the IRO Handbook (2010).
- 1.2 Following presentation to the Thurrock Corporate Parenting Committee, Overview and Scrutiny and the Thurrock Safeguarding Children's Partnership, this report will be placed on the Council website as a publically accessible document.
- 1.3 Where possible, this Report refers to Children Looked After (CLA). Such use reflects the views and wishes of children and young people 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 1st of April 2019 until the 31st of March 2020. Some of the data sets may vary slightly from those published by Children's Social Care due to minor variations in the timeframe for data capture.

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 Children Looked After 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 their best possible outcomes while in the care of the authority. It is acknowledged that wherever possible children should be cared for either within their own family or networks. However when it is felt that this is not a safe or suitable option all children are helped to find a long term permanent home.

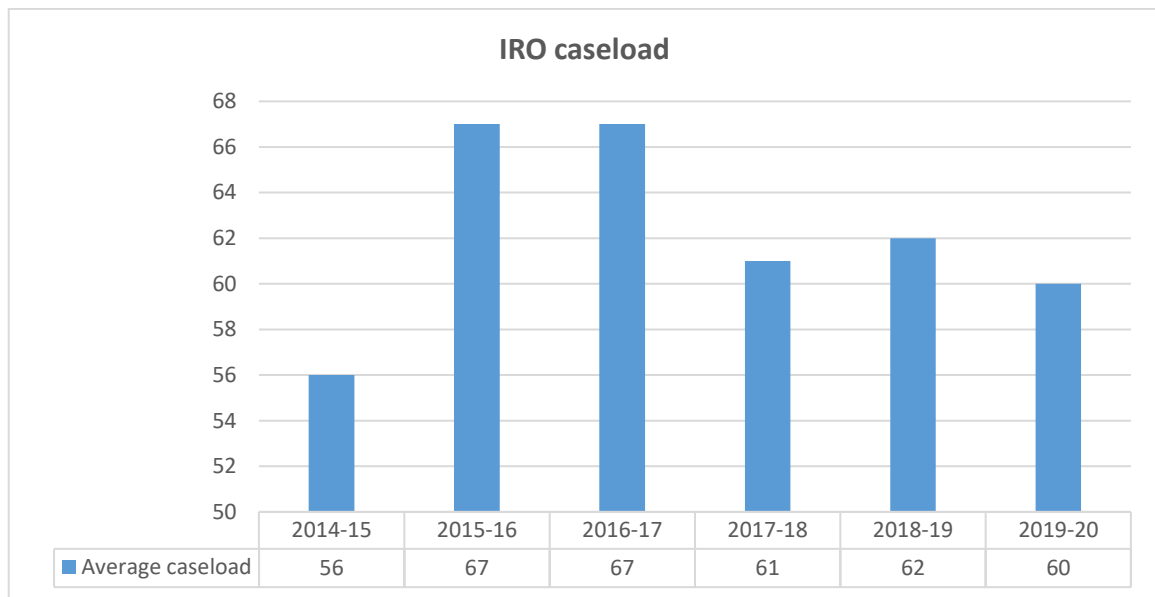
The IRO service plays a key role in monitoring and supporting plans to achieve this ambition.

5. Thurrock Council IRO Service

- 5.1 During the reporting period, two IROs have been appointed to fill vacancies within the service, however during that time all reviews were completed within timescales. Since the appointments, the IRO service has remained stable. There have been no periods of prolonged absence. The Service continues to comprise of five, permanent Independent Reviewing Officers, all of whom are experienced social work practitioners with social work management experience.
- 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 enhanced checks. All have relevant and appropriate skills, bringing to the role specialist knowledge and experience. All have substantial experience of effective direct work with children and young people.
- 5.3 There are two female and three male IROs and the IROs come from diverse backgrounds, ensuring young people in our care can be allocated to IROs across a range of ethnic groups.
- 5.4 All five of the IROs act independently of Thurrock Childrens Social Care and are not involved in preparation of care plans or the management of cases and have no control over resources allocated to a case.
- 5.5 During the reporting period the IROs were line managed by the Strategic Lead for Quality Assurance and latterly by the Service Manager for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

6. IRO Caseload and Service Performance

6.1 IRO caseloads



- 6.2 The average IRO caseload remained stable throughout the year with IROs having on average 60 cases, ranging between 57 and 62 cases.
- 6.3 To contextualise the caseloads, the IRO handbook suggests that an average IRO caseload should be between 50 - 70 children and young people for a full time post (FTE). However, the average IRO caseload is a crude indicator of the work undertaken by the IROs, as children and young people's circumstance and situations vary in complexity, and the distance that 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. There additionally needs to be enough flexibility in the service to respond to peaks in demand and associated workload, whilst maintaining a focus on quality and oversight.
- 6.4 The caseloads within Thurrock are thought to be manageable, based upon the complexity of the role carried out by the IRO.

7. Number of Child and Young Person in Care Reviews

Due in month	2019									2020			Total
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Total due	73	86	65	54	85	71	75	66	52	88	43	107	865
*Total held	80	76	62	98	44	87	89	62	85	76	78	103	940
Total held In timescale	79	76	61	94	44	86	86	62	84	76	78	103	929
Percentage of total due held in timescale	99 %	98 %	98 %	98 %	99 %	92 %	96 %	95 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	98 %	97.8% (yearly average)
Held In quarter	218			229			236			257			
Percentage held in timescale	99%			98%			98%			100%			

* The number held and number due vary due to CLA reviews being moved due to placement moves, school holidays or specific incidents.

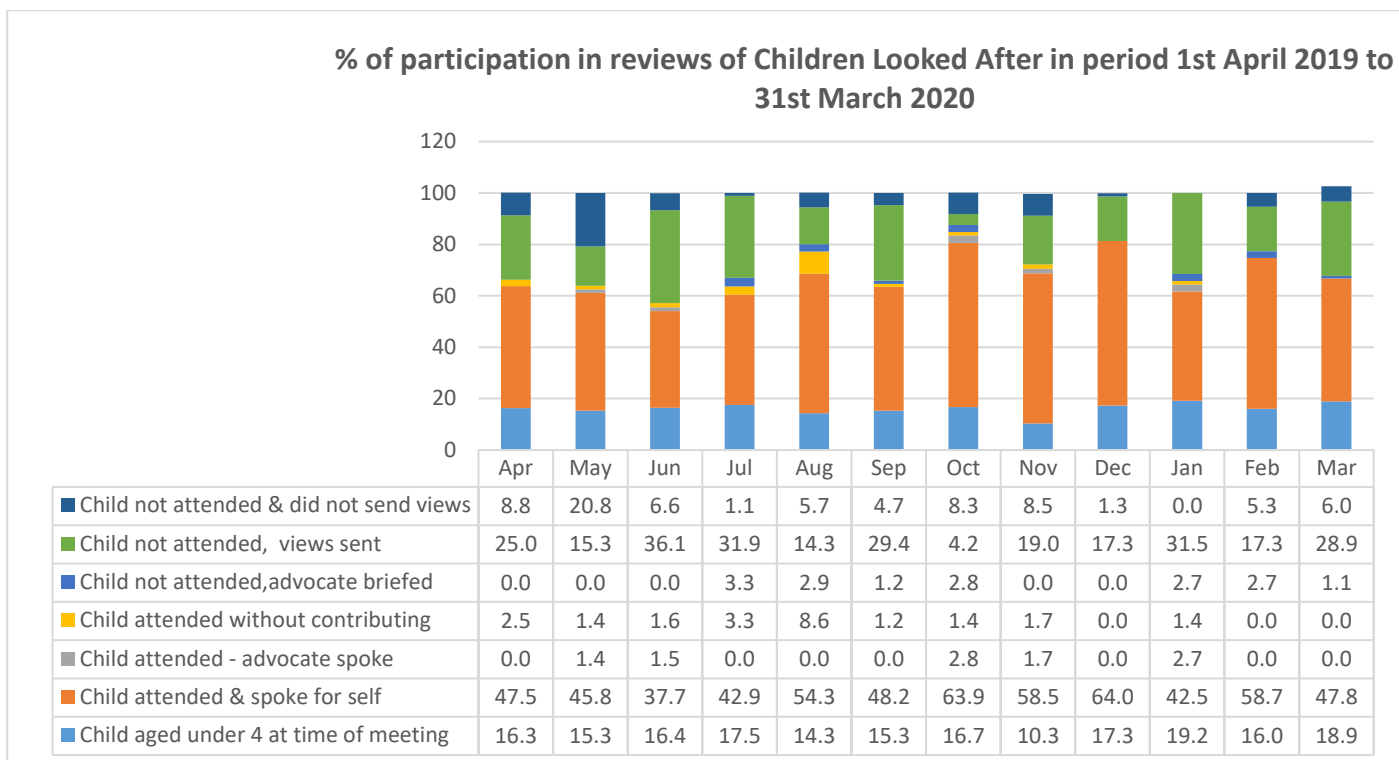
During the performance year April 2019 – March 2020, the IRO service conducted a total of 940 reviews. This is an increase of 185 reviews (24.5%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, improved during the year, with the final average being 97.5% of reviews held within timescales an increase of 4.5% when compared to last year.

In the small number of cases not held on time, these were the factors which affected performance:

- The IRO service not being notified early enough that children had become looked after and therefore, there was a delay in booking the 1st review meeting
- Human error regarding the date of the review resulting in the review being missed
- Problems on the day of the review, IRO, Social Worker, Carer, or report not available and so the review had to be cancelled

It is important to acknowledge that there will always be factors that result in reviews being delayed such as staff sickness or the need to change the date of a review so as to meet the needs and requirements of the child or young person however, it is important that, wherever possible, reviews are held in a timely manner and reviews are scheduled at 5 months and 2 weeks so as to take account of any unexpected delays and allow for reviews to be rescheduled.

7.1 Children and Young People’s Participation in Reviews



The monthly breakdown indicates that in the vast majority of reviews, young people attended reviews and spoke for themselves. This reflects the proactive approach taken by the IRO Service to actively engage with young people and involve them in the review process. This commitment is represented in the yearly totals with the numbers of children attending their review and speaking for themselves, increasing by 18% when compared to figures for 2018/19.

Participation	Total 2017-18	Total 2018-19	Total 2019-20
Not Recorded	105	0	0
PN0 Child aged under 4 at time of meeting	85	100	142
PN1 Child attended & spoke for self	332	372	439
PN2 Child attended - advocate spoke	5	3	10
PN3 Child attends and conveys his/her view symbolically (non-verbally)		2	
PN4 Child attended without contributing	4	5	14
PN5 Child not attended, advocate briefed with views	12	3	59

PN6 Child not attended, views sent	122	159	163
PN7 Child not attended & did not send views	83	103	40
Grand Total	750	747	1,137

The yearly totals indicate that there has been a significant increase in the numbers of children using an advocate to express their views (PN5) compared to previous years. This may in part be due to the outcomes of the 2018/19 key objectives, to ask the advocacy provider Open Door to contact every child over the age of 7 entering the Care System, paying dividend in terms of their involvement in the review process. The totals in participation exceeds the number of reviews as there are occasions whereby a child or young person may be recorded in two categories for example a child may not attend a review but sends their views in, as well as being represented by an advocate.

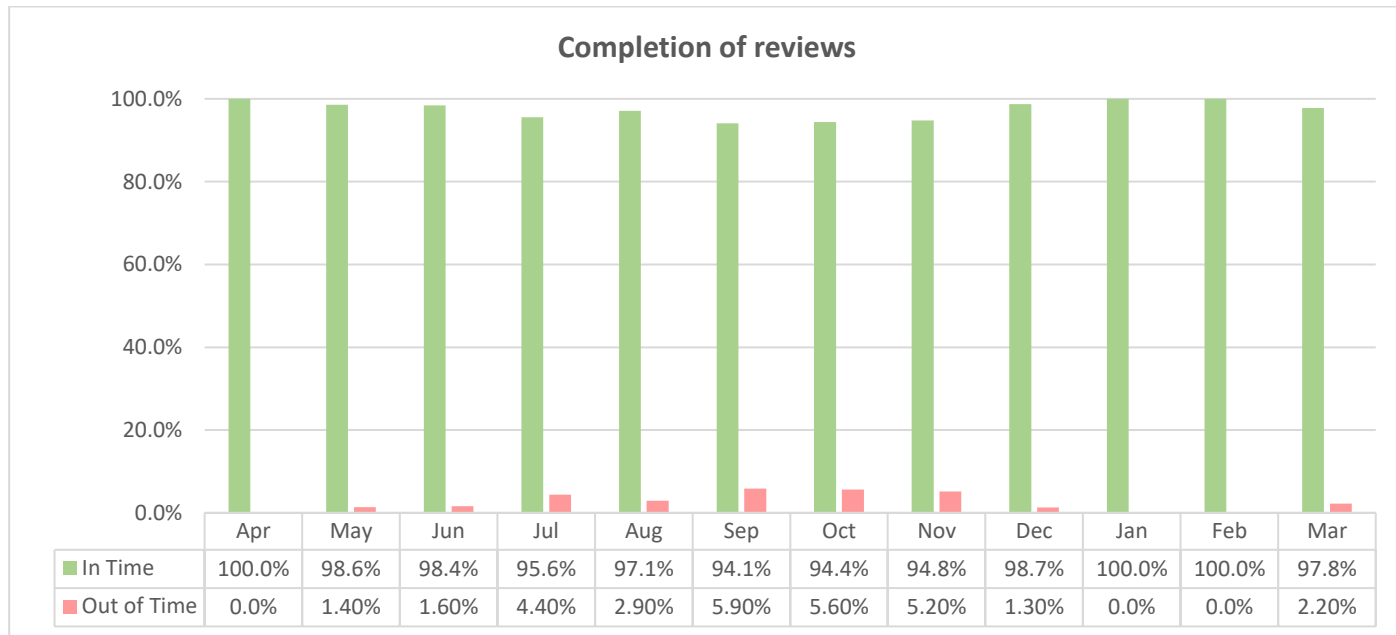
This year, children and young people participated in person, or through an advocate, or by another means in 94.6% of their reviews (excludes children under 4 years of age). This was an improvement on last year's performance of 84.0%.

Children or young people who did not attend their review, or send their views (PN7), equated for only 3.5% of the total information recorded, compared to 13.8% for the previous year and is perhaps a further indication of the ongoing commitment by the IRO service to actively engage young people in the review process.

Whilst only a small percentage, it is important to scrutinise those children or young people who did not attend their reviews. The reasons given for this figure related to older children making an informed choice not to attend their reviews or young people refusing to engage with the process and routinely going missing. In these circumstances the IROs work closely with the connected network of the young person to gain as full a picture of the child's life as possible.

The increase in participation of children and young people was a key objective of the 2018/19 report, highlighting the need to develop the use of the "Mind of my Own" app and work closely with the Childrens Participation Officer and Children in Care Council. The data provided indicates that this has been somewhat successful, however it is important that this remains an ongoing focus.

7.2 Completion of Review Reports



On completion of the child’s review, the IRO is expected to complete a report on the Children’s Social Care computer system (LCS). The report provides a note of the review and its discussions and the recommendations made in the review. The target for having these review outcome reports completed and distributed to young people, parents and professionals is within 20 working days of the review.

At the end of 2018/19, there was a marked improvement in reports completed by IROs within timescale. This has continued throughout 2019/20 with the timeliness of the reports completed by IROs ranging between 94.4% to 100.0%. For the period April 2019 to March 2020, 97.6% of reports were completed within timescale.

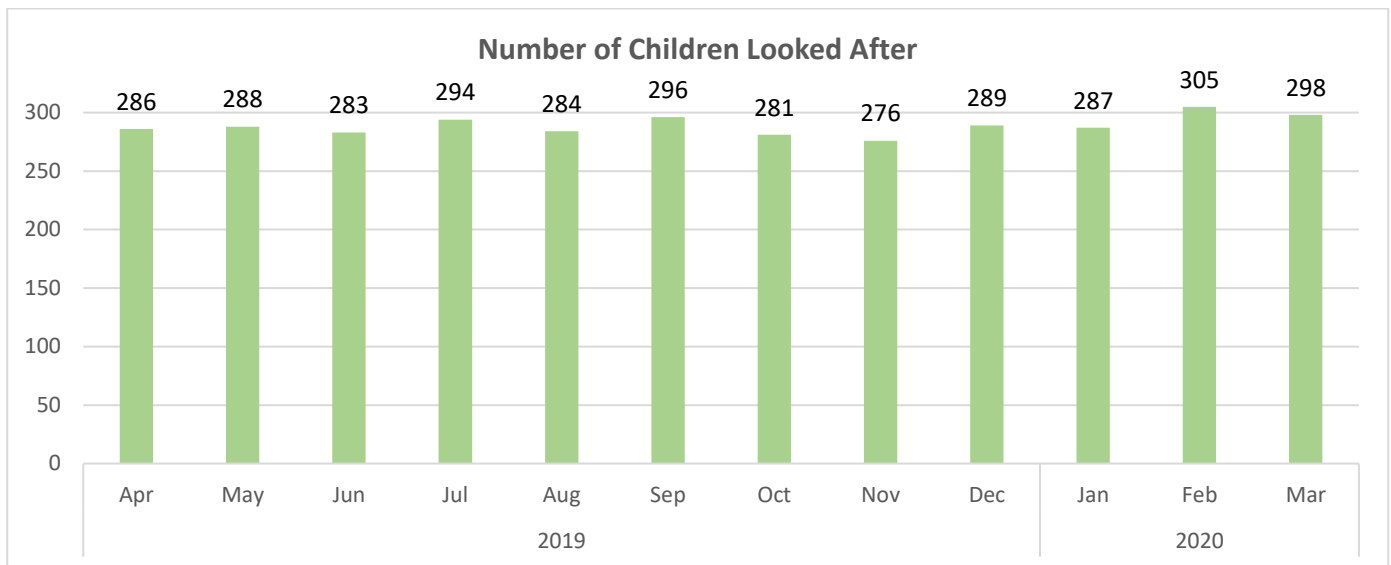
8. The Use of Feedback and Consultation forms

The IRO service continues to actively promote the Mind of my Own app which allows young people to express their opinion directly in to the Review process. There have also been activity days held for Children Looked After and young people where the IRO service played an active role in seeking the views of children and young people regarding the review process.

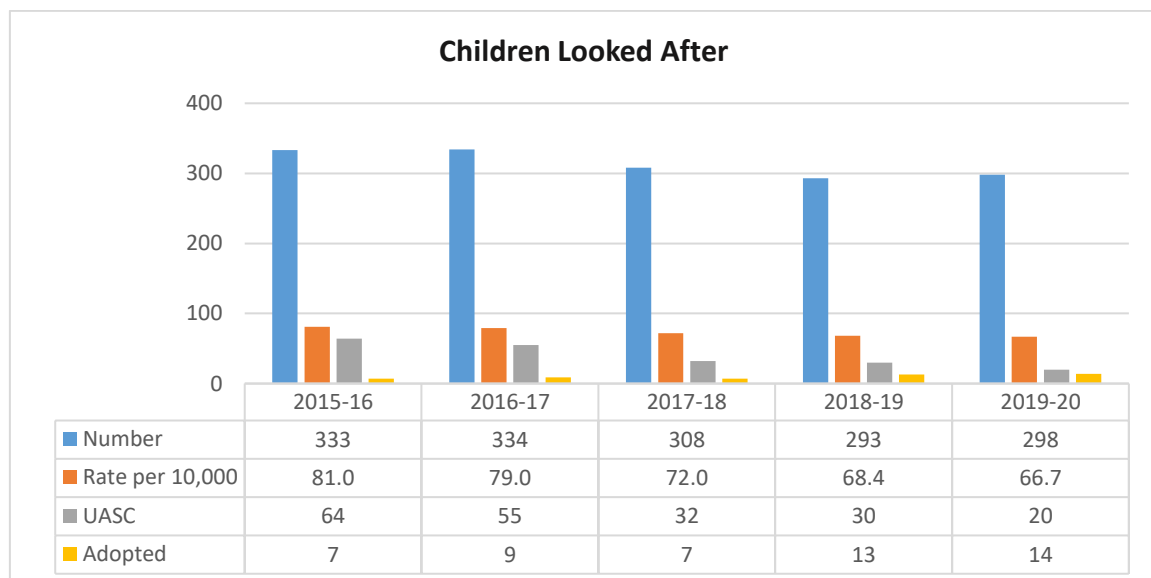
The compliance checklist has also recently been reviewed and will be used as a discussion tool with Allocated Social Workers to consult with them regarding strengths as well as areas for development in practice. The information gathered from these forms will also help shape practice by identifying trends and patterns within the service.

9. Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

9.1 Numbers of Children in Care



The monthly breakdown for the number of Children Looked After has remained relatively consistent throughout the year ranging between 305 and 276.



Of the 12 million children living in England, just over 400,000 (3%) are in the Social Care System at any one time. More than 75,000 of these children are Children Looked After across England. This is an increase of 28.0% in the last decade. That said however, the number of Children Looked After in England has declined by 0.1% to 75,370, compared to 75,420 last year.

Figures in Thurrock have increased by 5 children since 2018/19, however, the figure per 10,000 has slightly decreased due to an increase in the population in Thurrock.

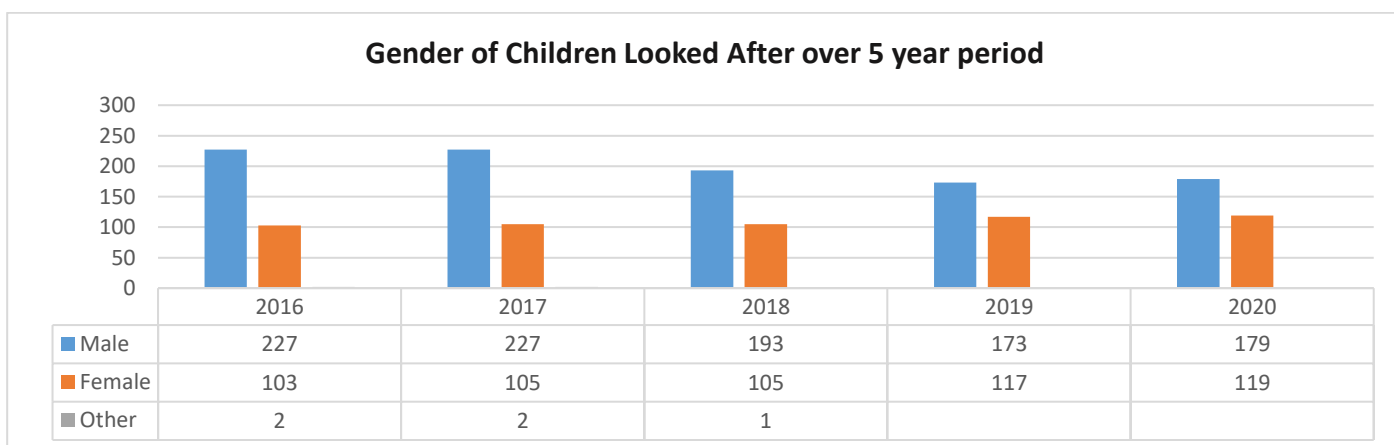
There has been a significant decrease in the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) coming to the attention of the Local Authority and becoming Looked After, falling by 33.3% from the figures presented in the 2018/19 report. This differs from the national

picture for UASC whereby the number of UASC increased by 11.0%. Despite this decline in numbers Thurrock still remains a high point of entry. During the reporting period there were 81 UASC arriving in Thurrock, however many of these young people were transferred to other local authorities in the Eastern Region under the auspices of the National Transfer Protocols Scheme. This agreement between 11 Local Authorities within the Eastern Region has proved successful in ensuring that the numbers of UASC within any local authority are equitable.. This has led to total number of UASC and young people in Care are similar, representing 6% nationally and 6.7% in Thurrock of the total number of the children and young people in Care.

Most UASC are male (90%), 85.0% are aged 16 and over, and 87.0% have a primary need of absent parenting. UASC are not distributed evenly around the country. Local Authorities with points of entry to the country, for example Kent and Croydon, have much larger numbers of UASC than other Local Authorities. Thurrock, due to its location and proximity to London, as well as the local port, places Thurrock firmly as one of these points of entry. However, as mentioned above, there is an Eastern Region agreed scheme in place to help redistribute UASC across the Region.

4.6% of children leaving care were adopted during the year 2019/20, a modest increase on the figures presented in the 2018/19 report. Recent data indicates that nationally, the number of Placement Orders (legislation which permits a child to be placed for adoption) decreased by 14% compared to 2018/19. Thurrock has fewer children adopted than its statistical neighbours. In 2019 the Leadership Team introduced a new Permanency Planning process to identify and scrutinise the permanency plans for children in proceedings. Where there are no other options within the family and the needs of all siblings are balanced, Thurrock will seek to place children for adoption in a timely way. This scrutiny process ensures plans are robust and was noted in the OFSTED inspection as a feature of good practice. Longer term we can anticipate a changing picture in the number of children adopted, as the impact of COVID-19 and the national decreasing trend for adoption affects plans for children locally.

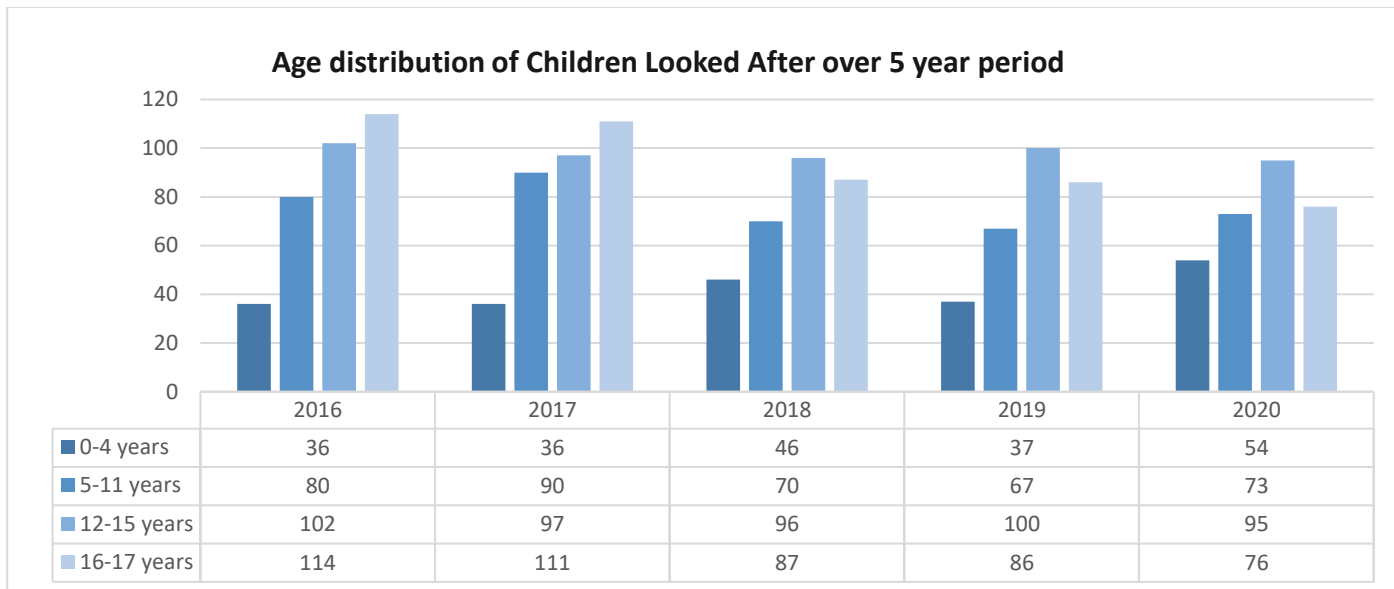
9.2 Gender of Children and Young People in Care



The number of males in care in the last 5 years has exceeded the number of females. Interestingly, 2019/20 represents the lowest number of males in care and the highest number of females. The number of females has increased by 15.3% during this period, whilst the number of males has decreased by 21.1%. This may be, in part due to the decreasing number of UASC who remain as CLA.

Nationally, just over half are male (56%) and 44% are female, similar to 2018/19.

However there is still a higher proportion of boys Looked After. Factors which can be affecting this relate to issues such as youth offending, perceived aggressive behaviour and non-school attendance, all of which put boys at higher risk of entering care.



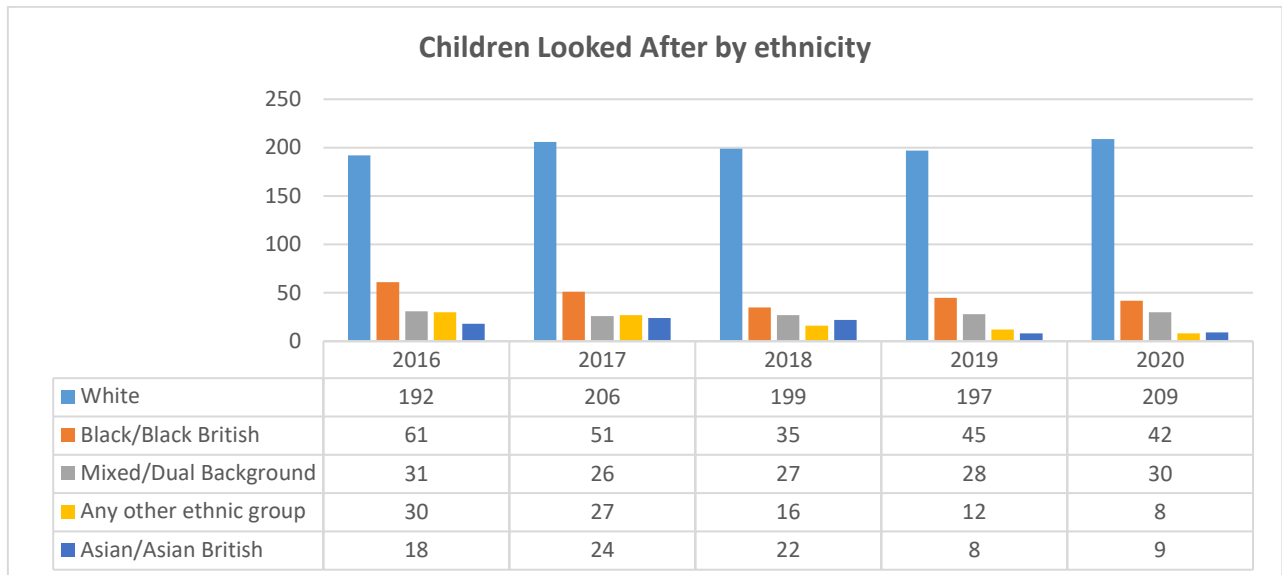
Over the 5 year period detailed above, the age distribution of Children Looked After has seen children in the 12-15 year old age bracket represent the largest proportion of Children Looked After for the third consecutive year. Children aged between 0–4 years has seen the largest increase when compared to figures for last year (45.9%). However this still remains the category with the least number of children. This may be as a result of Thurrock’s ongoing commitment to working with families, especially parents of younger children to provide them with every opportunity to remain within their family unit.

Nationally the largest age group (39.0%) are aged 10-15 years; 24.0% are aged 16 years and over; 18.0% are aged 5-9 years, 13.0% are aged 1-4 years and 5.0% are aged under 1 year. Over the last 5 years the national average age of Children Looked After has been steadily increasing.

9.3 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 domain 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 s/he is and where s/he has come from, and to understand, as far as s/he is able, why s/he is 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.

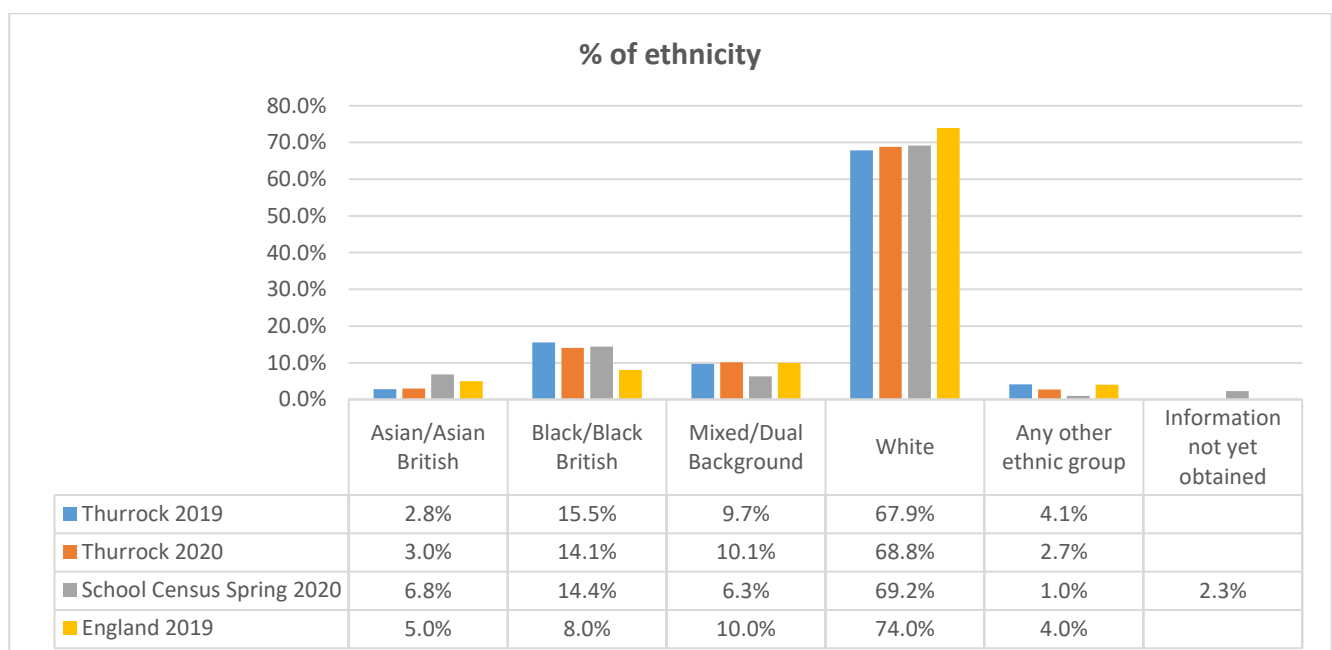
Racial and cultural identity is an important aspect of identity for many Children Looked After. The assessment of each individual child’s needs alongside the child’s own views will determine the actions which should be put into the care plan to ensure that s/he is able to develop a strong sense of identity and self-esteem. This will act not only as a strong protective factor against unhealthy risk-taking behaviours, but enable the child to maximise his/her 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 ethnicity of children and young people Looked After has shown little or no change on a month-by-month basis.

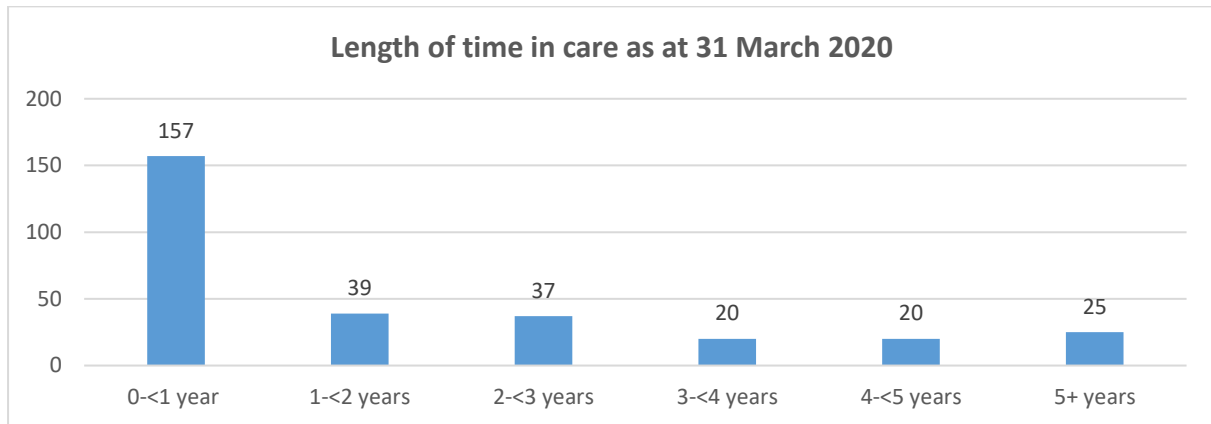
Consideration needs to be given to the specific demographics of the ethnic population in Thurrock, however, further exploration is required regarding the differences in this data to ensure that the interventions offered to families are equitable and consistent with regards to the application of thresholds and the expectations of families regarding the care of their children.

The graph below shows that the percentage of Black/Black British children in care in 2020 is 14.1% which is below Thurrock school census of 14.4% but above national average of 7.6% based on the latest benchmarking data available in 2018-19. Ethnicity data is not available at statistical neighbour level.



The data indicates that based upon the 2020 school census, Black/Black British children are not over-represented in the Care System however, there is over-representation from children from a mixed/dual background.

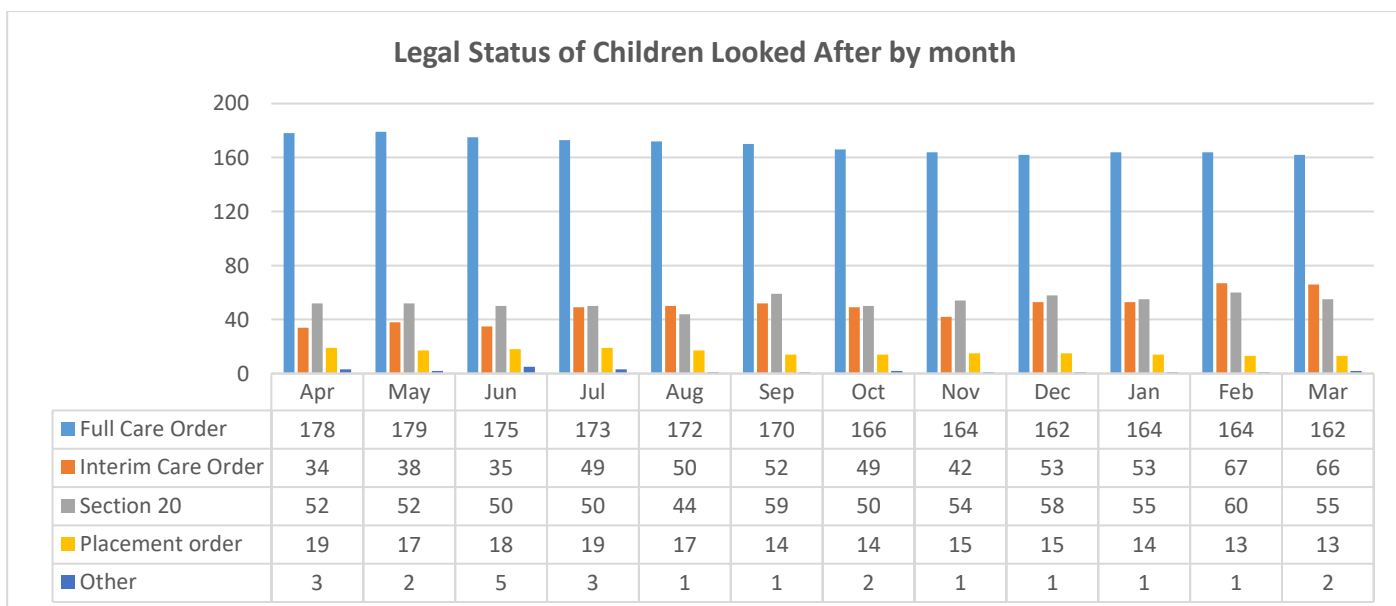
9.4 Time in Care for Children and Young People



This above graph shows that last year’s trend has continued with fewer children remaining in care long-term and the majority of children coming into care for between 1 and 3 years. The total for children being in care for less than a year on the 31st March 2020 is greater than all of the other parameters added together.

The challenges for the IRO Service are in ensuring that there are effective permanency plans for all children and ensuring cases do not drift. There is also a need to work with long-term foster carers to explore whether a Special Guardianship arrangement would be more appropriate for a child who is in placement, and would be likely to remain in long-term foster care.

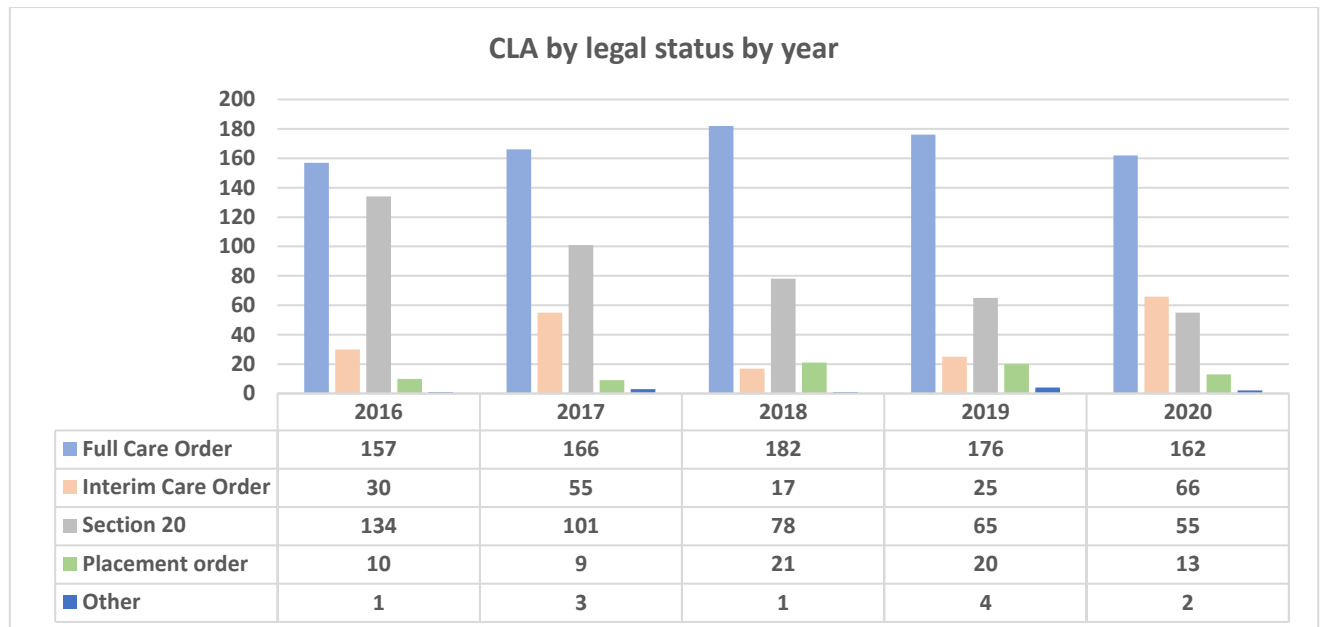
9.5 Legal Framework for Children in Care



Nationally 75.0% of Children Looked After were cared for under a Care Order, 18.0% under Section 20, 7.0% on a Placement Order and less than 0.5% on other types of orders.

Thurrock shows similar results with 76.5% of children cared for under a Care Order, 18.5% under Section 20, 4.4% on a Placement Order and 0.7% on other types of Order.

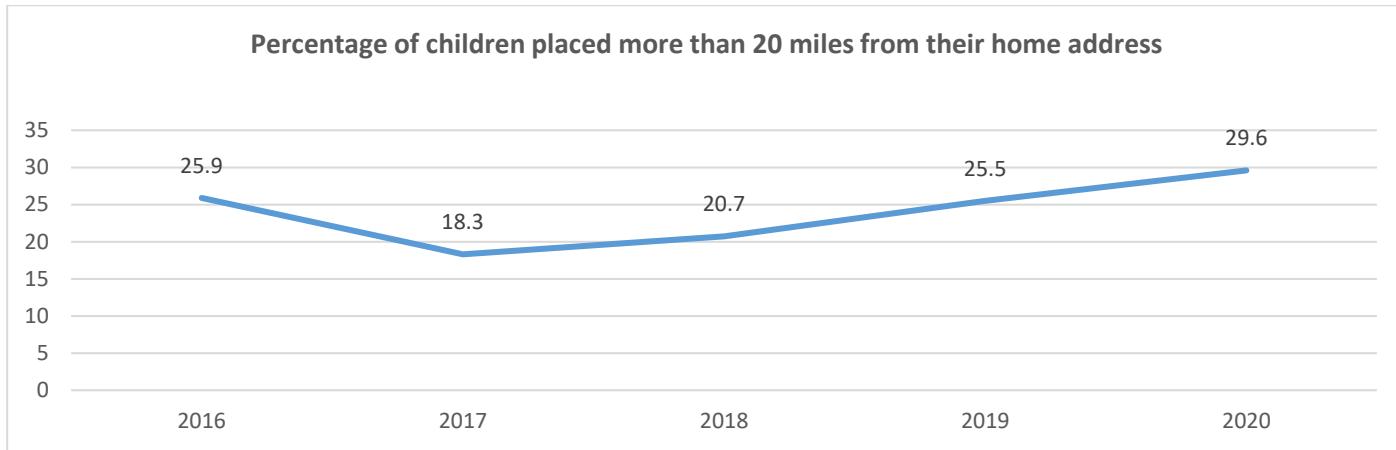
The majority of Children Looked After by Thurrock are subject, or have previously been subject, to legal proceedings, where they have suffered some form of abuse or neglect and the accommodation is being used to protect them from further harm and to secure permanency for these children.



Interestingly since 2016 data, it shows that the use of Interim Care Orders has overtaken the use of section 20 agreements. This may be due to a number of factors relating to the complexity of the safeguarding concerns managed by frontline services and the ability or willingness of parents to agree to S20 to manage the risk. Alternatively, this may also be an indication of changing practices within the teams regarding the use of Interim Care Orders to manage and assess risk, in line with the Munby Judgements relating to S20 in so far that it should only be used for short term arrangements and not longer than 6 months.

The challenge for the IRO Service is to ensure that plans are being carried out in timescales, regardless of the legal framework for their accommodation. Plans should meet the children’s needs, ensuring stability and security for children, and empower them to achieve the best possible outcomes.

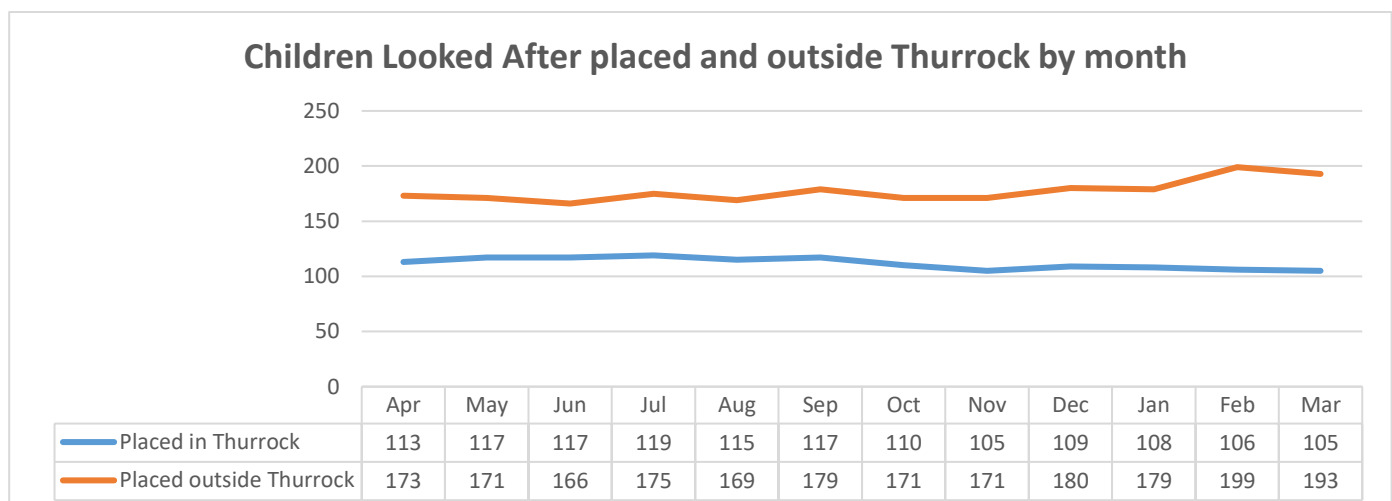
9.6 Placement location of Children and Young People in Care

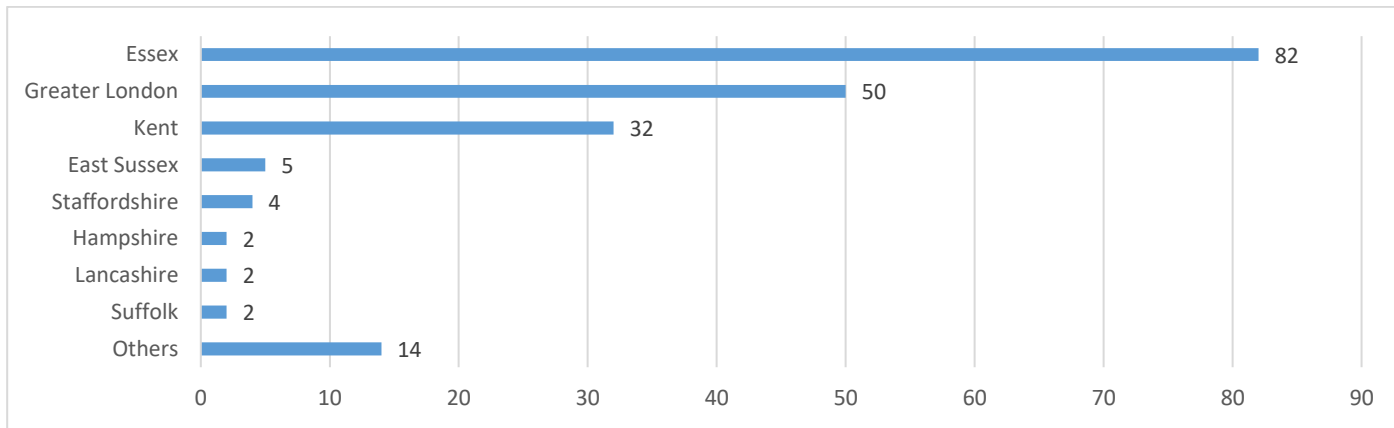


The number of children placed more than 20 miles away from their home has continued to rise and currently stands at just under 30.0%, this compares to 17% for statistical neighbours. The service recognises the need for every effort to be made to place children as close to their home and community as possible, so far as is consistent with their need to be safeguarded, or to have access to specialist therapeutic services.

Consideration, however, needs to be given to the finite resources available within Thurrock (for example specialist provision, residential units and schools) to meet the complex needs presented by children and young people entering the Care System, as well as the need for some young people to be placed a significant distance away from the area to ensure their safety and protection.

However there are a number of children who are placed just outside this 20 mile radius in Kent and Essex as well as some children who are placed within their family, however this is more than 20 miles away from Thurrock.





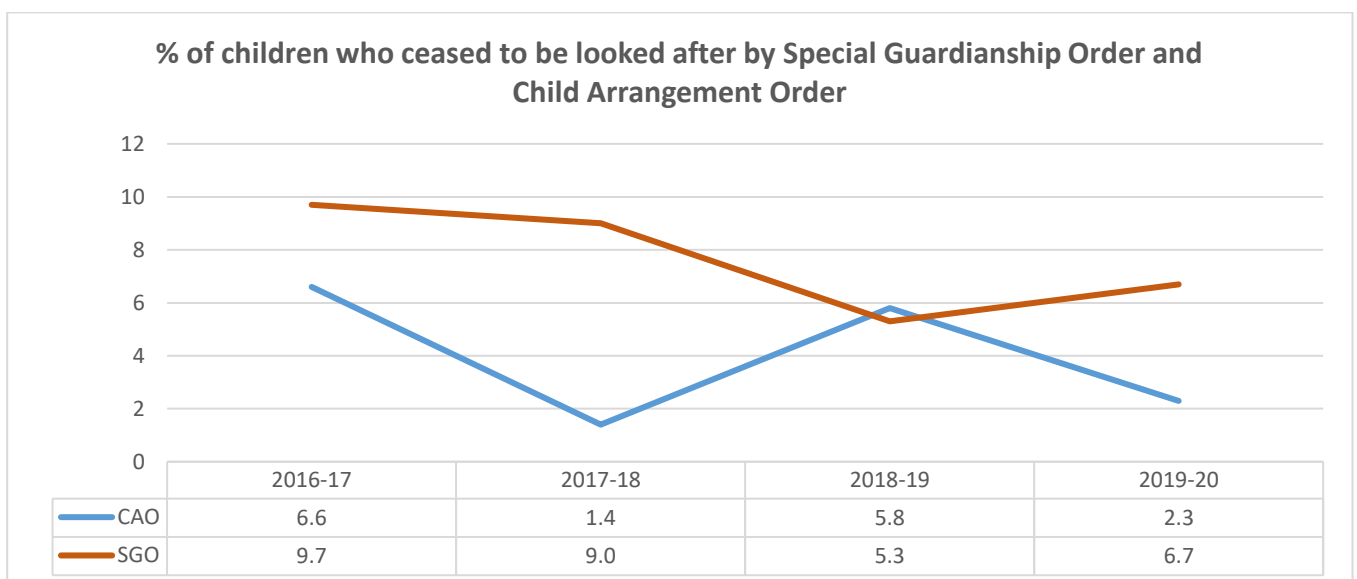
There are some Children Looked After who have complex and extreme behavioural support needs. For these children there are very limited local options for appropriate placements within Thurrock due to the nature of the needs, and these children are often placed some distance away from Thurrock due to these limitations in resources.

Placements are reviewed weekly in Thurrock and the IRO Service plays an active role at this meeting to ensure that the needs of young people and children are the paramount consideration when considering the type and location of placement.

10. Use of Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is an order appointing one or more individuals 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 Arrangement 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 Looked After.



Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders can be used in care proceedings when looking at placing the 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 a better chance of long term permanency for the child.

Compared to last year in Thurrock, 6.7% of children left care through Special Guardianship, representing an increase of 1.4%, and 2.3% through Child Arrangement Orders, representing 2.5% reduction.

It is also worth noting that the complexity of the risks faced by children and young people coming in to care may mean that a Child Arrangement Order or a Special Guardianship Order may not initially be appropriate.

The IRO service will continue to carefully scrutinise Children’s plans to consider the possibility of using Special Guardianship and Child Arrangement Orders.

11. IRO Service impact on the Outcomes for Children and Young People

11.1 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 Looked After 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 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 a formal Dispute Resolution Process in place whilst acknowledging and giving primacy to informal resolution, where possible.

Thurrock’s IRO’s are actively encouraged to manage most disagreements on an informal basis which has proved effective. More often than not, discussion with Social Workers and their Managers is effective in achieving the progress required.

In July 2018 the IRO Service developed a compliance checklist which is completed at each review and shared with the Social Worker, Team Manager and, if required, the Service Manager. This has recently been reviewed to focus specifically upon the timeliness of reports

and the progression of care plans. It is envisaged that this will allow areas of practice which normally lead to disputes to be identified earlier and thus be resolved at an informal level.

The IRO Service has recently made closer links with frontline services, with specific IROs being allocated to specific teams. This has allowed for the IROs to attend team meetings to inform them of processes and expectations. It is hoped that by building these working relationships, this will again allow for areas of concern to be addressed at an earlier stage on an informal basis. Early indications show that this has reduced the use of the dispute resolution process for simple process issues.

11.2 Formal Disputes Raised 2019-2020

The IRO Service recorded 12 completed dispute resolutions, which related to the following issues:

Number	Area of Practice Raised
2	Challenge raised regarding provision of education not meeting the needs of the child/young person.
3	Issues raised with regards failure of the Local Authority to adequately progress the agreed care plan for the child/young person.
1	Challenge to Local Authority plan for contact.
5	Challenge raised with regards to the suitability of the placement provided to the child/young person.
1	Challenge raised regarding Deprivation of Liberty.
1	Challenge raised regarding support provided by the Local Authority concerning assisting a young person with legal and practical issues relating to citizenship.

There were no disputes, which had to be referred to the Corporate Director of Children Services, or the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).

11.3 IRO Compliance Checklist

The IRO Checklist was introduced in July 2018 and has been used as a way of providing a monthly 'dip sample' into the quality of services provided to Children Looked After.

As mentioned earlier, the Compliance Checklist has been recently reviewed to focus specifically upon timeliness of reports and progression of care plans. This will allow the service to offer scrutiny and insight into key areas of performance, as well as being more responsive to requests from the service and to assist in gathering data in other areas.

12. Feedback from the Children in Care about the IRO Service

At a recent activity day, the views of children and young people were sought by the IRO Service. Feedback from that session indicated that 100% of children or young people wanted their reports shared with them in advance of the meeting, and children reported that on occasions they had not seen the reports prior to the review.

Only 16% of children felt that the School Nurse should be at their review and only 50% wanted their Teacher to attend. This feedback has helped the IRO Service to shape how reviews are conducted so that more information can be gathered outside of the review process, to limit the amount of adults in attendance and ensure that issues which are important to the young person, are discussed.

91% of children interviewed stated that they would like to participate in their review and 41% stated they would like to chair their own reviews. The IRO Service are keen to move towards young people chairing their reviews on a regular basis and are actively exploring ways to facilitate this.

75% of young people have stated that they would like their IRO to make contact with them between their reviews. In light of this, IROs are actively encouraged to undertake visits to see young people, in consultation with the Social Worker, so the young person does not feel overwhelmed by visits.

Young people were not too worried about the length of time that their review meeting takes, however 80% of them stated that they would not like their reviews to take place at their school. It is agreed that, wherever possible, reviews will no longer take place at schools.

13. IRO Service objectives in: 2019-2020

1. Work with the Children's Participation Officer and Children in Care Council to improve the participation of children and young people in reviews

Close links have been made with the Participation Officer to establish a working partnership whereby the IRO Service plays an active role in promoting the involvement of children and young people. The Mind of My Own app, which is actively promoted to Social Workers as well as children and young people, allows them to share their views regarding the review process. The IRO Service is also involved in participation days arranged by the Participation Officer and will use these as an opportunity to seek the views of children and young people. These events will ascertain how the Service can improve practice to ensure that the child or young person is central to the review process.

2. Review the Dispute Resolution Process to ensure that IROs are maximising their impact on improving outcomes for children and young people

The dispute resolution service has recently been reviewed, and is being embedded in the working practices of the IRO Service and is in the process of being added to the electronic recording systems.

3. Continue to embed and learn from the implementation of Mind of My Own as a communication tool

The work on the Mind of My Own app, which will facilitate children and young people to communicate their views regarding their review, remains ongoing. The App is firmly embedded in the working practices surrounding the review process, however it is recognised that further work is needed to ensure that this is routinely used, allowing young people to open their own account through the App to share their views.

4. Continue to improve the quality of children in care plans and pathway plans through joint training and working, with some focus on planning towards transitions and re-unification

This has been explored through the reflective practice sessions that have been co-chaired by the IROs, focussing on these issues to raise standards in this area. It is recognised that this is an ongoing area of development.

5. Develop the use of the Signs Of Safety/Signs Of Success model within the IRO Service

Signs of Safety is used across Thurrock. It is recognised that the IRO Service is yet to fully embed this in to the review process during the reporting period. There are clear plans in place to develop a range of ways to undertake reviews and provide a written record of the meeting using the language of Signs of Safety. Recordings of the meetings will focus on what's going well, what are we worried about and what do we need to change. It is planned that this new way of managing reviews will be piloted in 2020-21 with a view to implementation in the upcoming year 2021/22.

6. Review the impact of compliance checklists and use them to improve culture around preparation for reviews

As mentioned above, the compliance checklist is currently under review and focusses upon the timeliness and quality of reports. The checklist will allow for data to be gathered and compiled, to present to management, to ascertain patterns regarding performance, as well as to share learning.

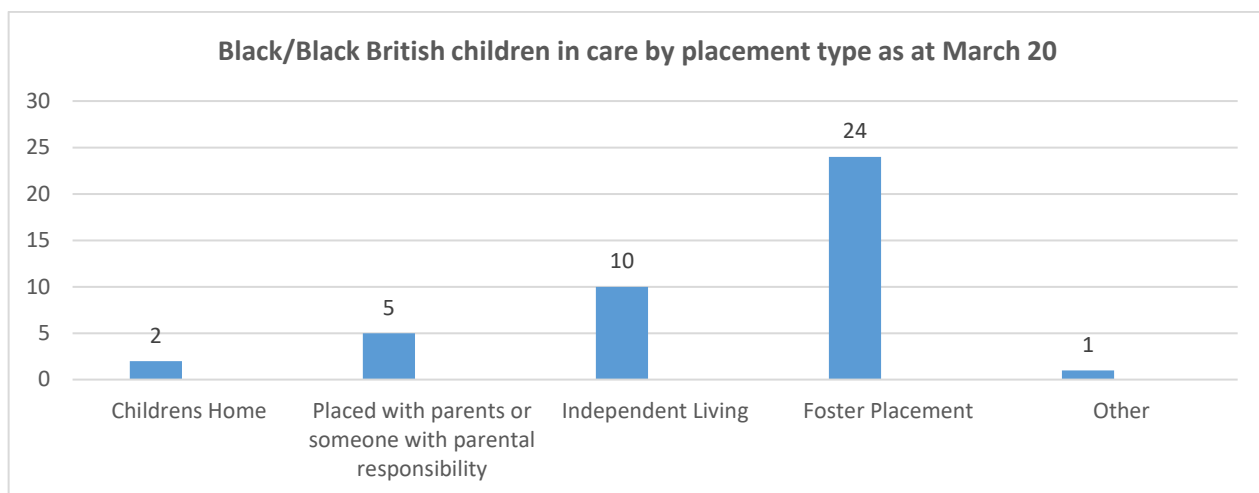
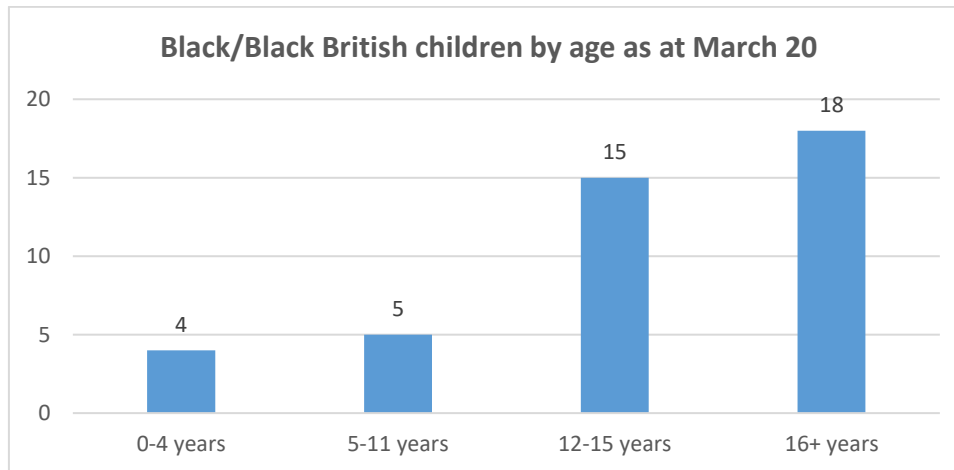
7. Develop the role of IRO with regard to the Public Law Outline work (PLO) and Permanency Planning Processes

Links have been developed with Legal Services who regularly attend team meetings to ensure that the IRO Service is up to date with the PLO process, as well as any other Legal processes relevant to the service.

8. Develop the child focus of reviews

As raised in point 5, there are plans to implement new ways of recording the Review in line with the ethos of Signs of Safety. It is planned that much of the information can be gathered outside of the review so that the meeting can focus upon issues that the child or young person would like to talk about. It is envisaged that this will reduce the amount of time that is spent undertaking the review and allow for the child or young person to play a more active role in deciding the agenda.

9. Review the reasons for Black/Black British children coming into care alongside the quality of services to meet their needs



As outlined in the table above, the number of children from Black/Black British backgrounds coming into care are not over-represented when compared to the 2020 schools census. The graph above represents the numbers of children from a Black/Black British background and the types of placement.

Due to local availability, there are times when the needs of children are met cross-culturally, however there is extensive work offered to these families by the Fostering and Adoption Services to address this, including mandatory on line training, and further services are planned for example direct face to face training focussed on diversity and meeting the needs of children from a range of backgrounds. The teams are constantly looking to recruit foster carers from all ethnicities, to ensure that the cultural needs of children coming into care in Thurrock are catered for.

During 2019-20, 19 Black/ Black British children came into care, 42% of those children are no longer in care. 17 were of Black African Heritage. The majority were older children (68% teenagers) and 42% were Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. 6 children were of primary age and these were 2 family groups of younger children; one family group of 4 were placed with extended family members, the other family group of 2 are no longer Looked After. The reasons that the children came into care (with the exception of those seeking asylum) were due to concerns about abuse or neglect linked to parental domestic abuse, mental health or addiction, or there were concerns about the young person’s behaviour and/or involvement in gangs or criminal exploitation.

Objectives for 2020/21

1. IROs to play an active role in promoting Mind of My Own to children and young people and encouraging them to open and use their own accounts.
2. The IRO Service to become actively involved in linking with the frontline teams in a consultancy capacity and attending team meetings at least quarterly, to provide information regarding the Looked After process.
3. To provide assistance and advice regarding housing transitions for young people leaving care and becoming 18 years, for both mainstream leaving care and children with disabilities transitioning to Adult Social Care.
4. IROs to work proactively with Social Workers and Managers to minimise escalations, to avoid tension between the Social Workers/Managers and IRO Service.
5. IRO's to design a child-friendly CLA Review record which will be more accessible to children.
6. The IROs to play an active role with Social Work teams to ensure permanency is achieved for Children Looked After without delay.