

# **Children's Social Care**

## **Annual Report on Independent Reviewing Officers for Children Looked After**

The contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to quality assuring and improving services for children in care of Bromley Council

**2020-2021**

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## Purpose of Report

An annual report of the Independent Reviewing Service for children looked after is required in accordance with the *Children and Young Person's Act 2008* and provides a summary of the work undertaken by the IROs for the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. It also provides themes for further service improvement for the financial year 2021-22. The IROs combine their role with that of chairing Child Protection Conferences and are known by the title of Reviewing Officer. This report focuses on the discharge of the IRO role and responsibilities. The terms Reviewing Officer (RO) and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) are used interchangeably in the report.

## Introduction

- 1.1 The appointment of an Independent Review Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. In March 2010, the government issued new statutory guidance for local authorities and IROs on care planning and reviewing arrangements for looked after children as contained in *Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and Statutory Guidance*. This came into force from April 2011. The IRO handbook 2010 supplements this and provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to children looked after.
- 1.2 The annual report is a management responsibility as set out in the IRO Handbook 2010, Chapter 7, Strategic and Management responsibilities where Section 7.11 states; "The manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed".
- 1.3 Every parent wants the best for their child and as a corporate parent, Bromley Council is working to make sure that the aspirations for our children looked after are that they

be healthy, safe and happy, do well at school, enjoy good relationships with their peers and grow towards adulthood equipped to lead independent lives. This report should be read in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting annual report.

- 1.4 Each child has their own IRO from the time they become looked after. The IRO role is to offer support and challenge and advocacy, to be a critical friend in ensuring care planning is meeting the holistic needs of children within the timescales that children need, escalate issues that are adversely impacting on achieving good outcomes for children to the right level of the management structure, drive and champion plans for permanence, and monitor the performance of the local authority as a corporate parent. Above all, the IRO must make sure that children's wishes and feelings are given full consideration in relation to their care plans and the support being given to them by their social workers.
- 1.5 This report explores the local authority's responsibilities as outlined above.

## **2. Profile of the Independent Reviewing Service in Bromley**

- 2.1 The Reviewing Officers are placed within the Quality Improvement Service in the Children's Social Care Division of the Children, Families and Education Directorate, People Department. Reviewing Officers have a unique position within the Division in that they do not hold the case decision making responsibility or supervisory responsibilities with social workers and can therefore take an independent view of the service and care planning being provided for children. The Reviewing Officers are valued members of the Children's Social Care Division and are not independent of the Local Authority, something that is a common misconception.
- 2.2 The service is structured to be composed of 8 full-time ROs, 3 part-time ROs and 1 full-time Fostering IRO (FIRO). The Reviewing Officers are managed by two Group Managers. The fostering IRO conducts the annual review of Bromley foster households to ensure they are meeting fostering standards and providing good parenting to our children living in our care. There is one Business Support Officer who leads on the administration of looked after reviews. The service saw more stability developing during 2020-21. A new Group Manager was recruited but the Reviewing Officers embedded in their roles. There was occasional turnover of locum Reviewing Officers, which particularly affected two of the three part time posts in the service. The

timeliness of the core function of looked after reviews increased slightly from 91% to 94% within the reporting year, and the aim is to achieve as close to 100% as possible in the future.

- 2.3 There continues to be high support and challenge to Reviewing Officers to improve outcomes for children and make a real difference to their lives. The Reviewing Officers have continued to improve the consistency and quality of their tracking and 'footprint' between reviews. This impact has been recognised in our Practice Assurance Stocktakes undertaken of our work alongside the Children Looked After and Leaving Care service areas. The focus has remained on professional development in building knowledge, skills and abilities of the IROs. The model of writing review minutes to the child or young person is fully embedded and our Reviewing Officers have grown the leadership element of their role in running Task and Finish groups to lead on how the service improves reviews and the child-centred quality of the records and recommendations from reviews. Starters in the service receive a full two-week induction to support their skills in this aspect of their role and this involves role modelling and observation, which continues beyond this period. The service is strengthening knowledge of the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer and has delivered seminar style training to a cohort of newly qualified social workers and students. This will become available to all new starters (and colleagues who wish to engage with a refresher) on a quarterly basis during 2021-22. Group Managers and the Head of Service have continued to extend the reach of the Quality Improvement Service through membership of the full range of decision-making panels, including Legal Gateway Panel, Placement Panel, Children in Need panel and the Permanency Panel. The service established a Child Protection Scrutiny Panel to seek to unblock children who had been subject to long term Child Protection Plans. During 2021-22, this will extend to thematic sessions which will include scrutiny of care planning and decision making where children with Child Protection Plans may become looked after to support the quality of decision making and permanence planning. The challenge for the service continues to be demonstrating consistently good and excellent work to support and challenge the Division to achieve the best and most timely outcomes possible for children and young people.
- 2.4 The team reflects the diversity of the looked after population in Bromley and requires that all IROs have the skills and ability to meet the needs of children from diverse communities.

2.5 Guidance from the IRO Handbook outlines that each IRO should have a caseload between 50 to 70 children. During the period of this report the IROs experienced some fluctuation. Successful recruitment of permanent Reviewing Officers and an increase in the quality of some locum staff recruited was reflected by caseloads at the end of the period establishing at an average of 49 at the end of the year with an equitable split between Child Protection and IRO work for all the Reviewing Officers. This caseload has contributed to the Reviewing Officers achievement of consistent and impactful footprint. The impact of the pandemic and virtual meetings has had the unintended consequence of impacting on Reviewing Officers relationships with young people as the format does not work well for all children and young people. As the route out of the restrictions becomes clearer and sustained, the service will work closely with colleagues to identify children and young people who may be prioritised for reviews to increasingly be able to safely happen in a face to face meeting, so that relationships are at the forefront.

### **3. Corporate Parenting Board**

3.1 The Deputy Leader is the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and leads the Corporate Parenting Board. The purpose of the Corporate Parenting Board is to ensure the Council with its partners effectively discharges its responsibilities to all children and young people looked after and care leavers.

3.2 The Corporate Parenting Board is made up of senior officers of the Council, its partner agencies, members of the Living in Care Council (LinCC) and Change for Care Leavers (CfCL). The Board drives improvement in services through rigorous challenge and support. The Corporate Parenting Board is jointly chaired by the Deputy Leader of the Council, and Portfolio Holder for Education, Children and Families, and the Chair of LinCC.

3.3 As a Corporate Parent to all children and young people looked after and care leavers the Council and its partners must act as a responsible and good parent.

3.4 The Quality Improvement service has ambition to play a full part in the work of the Corporate Parenting Board and has active membership of each of the sub-groups that

reflect the priority areas for development and improvement. The strategic areas the sub-groups are responsible for are Support and Stability, Health and Wellbeing, Education and Enjoyment, Transitions and Independence. The Quality Improvement service will be working closely with our Living in Care Council and Change for Care Leavers to improve young people's participation in reviews through delivery of training and support for our Reviewing Officers. Our Reviewing Officers are ambitious to make their reviews as child/young person centred as possible and are developing a model that will aim to embed young person leadership. This is complex in the context of the pandemic to achieve through a virtual meeting methodology and will necessarily involve some return to face-to-face meetings.

#### **4. Voice and Influence of Children and Young People**

4.1 While this report should be read in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting annual report, children and young people can participate in decisions and activities that shape and influence practice, policies and services that can impact on their lives. Bromley have a dedicated team to work directly with our children to support their inclusion in services, they are called the Active Involvement Team (AIT). Some highlights of note during the 2020-21 period include as follows:

- The further development of a strong vision, with all team members making a promise to go above and beyond for young people, to give a shared sense of community and identity to give young people a sense of belonging and to feel loved.
- Specific examples of impact for young people and improving social work practice include the creation of a social worker job description; developing and delivering training to newly qualified social workers to support them building effective relationships with children and young people; speed dating sessions and quizzes with service areas to build relationships and influence beyond the Children Looked After and Leaving Care service.
- Bright Spots surveys have again been led by the team with support from the Virtual School and Reviewing Officers and key findings are reported in the Corporate Parenting annual report.
- Young People completed a successful pilot to become a core part of the challenge and scrutiny of services and Heads of Service, holding sessions alongside the PDS Chair and Director of Children's Services for young person focussed scrutiny of the previous annual reports of the Virtual School and Independent Reviewing Officer service.
- The team has supported impactful work of young people to prioritise the needs of young parents. This has included successful campaigning for an additional Setting up

Home Allowance, a monthly Chat and Chill session, the development of parenting classes alongside a Children's Centre and a Housewarming Gift policy for young people achieving their first tenancies.

- The team adapted well to virtual events. Although the usual annual Fun Day could not proceed, Celebration events were successfully held virtually and saw the highest number of award nominations for children and young people to date.
- Summer programmes for children and young people have continued. Of note is that sensitive exploration of themes of race and identity, in addition to celebrating Black History Month, has directly been incorporated in to training for foster carers and social workers, helping to support for example the stability of matched trans-racial placements.
- Further achievements of the team include the extension of New Beginnings group work for young people under 18 which supported four of seven young people attending to secure employment soon after. Meanwhile the successful extension of My Bank workshops for young people aged 14 and 15 will promote greater financial resilience and independence for young people before they begin planning their transition to adulthood alongside their social workers.
- The most significant challenge has been the loss of more young people from the LinCC work during the lengthy periods with social restrictions than had been expected, showing how vital the social aspect of the work is for our children and young people. At the current time with restrictions having eased, the LinCC and CFCL are again able to meet in person and have strong membership.

4.2 One of the key roles of Reviewing Officers is to offer a critical friend role if there is concern as to how the Local Authority is discharging its Corporate Parenting duties. This can involve raising themes and trends identified with the senior management team or it can on an individual child level see an issue of disagreement escalated for resolution. The Reviewing Officers have increased their use of the Dispute Resolution Protocol (set out below in section 5) and have played an active role in supporting colleagues to improve placement stability for children and young people.

## **5. Action taken to improve IRO Performance**

### ***Supervision, Training and Development for IROs***

5.1 Reviewing Officers receive monthly supervision and have access to informal supervision as and when needed. Managers remain committed to ensuring the level

of supervision and support to the IROs is of the highest standard. Group Managers regularly sample children's records to assess the quality and visibility of IRO support and challenge and have analysed individual areas for focus as required to drive improved practice and performance. The Quality Assurance framework including Practice Assurance Stocktakes support the identification of areas for improvement and the service has played an increasing role in this process and auditing exercises when requested by the Assistant Director of Children's Social Care. The Head of Service of Quality Improvement is now a member of the small team undertaking the Practice Assurance Stocktakes under the leadership of our external consultant, while our Reviewing Officers have contributed two practice reviews upon each auditing round. This helps promote the service as champions of quality assurance and best practice. The service is aware of the need to achieve consistent tracking of the progress of children and evidence actions taken to support and challenge social workers and their managers if the RO is concerned about how any aspect of a child or young person's needs are being responded to, and where there is an indication of drift or delay that can be remedied to achieve timely and ambitious outcomes. Turnover of staff has reduced, and has become more focused around temporary agency cover, with legacy part time roles having been particularly challenging to recruit to with stability. The service is now nearly at a point where it is permanently staffed with Reviewing Officers presently in the 'pipeline'.

5.2 The Reviewing Officers have attended an external conference to support the quality of their planning, recognition of and response to risks to young people in the community that is known as contextual safeguarding. One of the Group Managers in the service is an active participant in the regional IRO managers network and is influential in work to develop a standard university level training programme for Reviewing Officers, that in future may be able to act as a benchmark for recruitment and retention. The Reviewing Officers will be having bespoke Bromley Relationship Model training during 2021-22 and will also deliver training to social work colleagues to support our model of safety planning with children and young people.

5.3 The Reviewing Officers have a monthly half day team meeting and twice weekly Keeping in Touch meetings in which they share practice themes and trends with each other. including briefings on childcare issues and new developments in practice. Of note has been training support and feedback sessions from Coram Voice that enabled our Reviewing Officers to play an active part in conducting interviews with children to contribute to the recent Bright Spots survey and a presentation to ensure ROs were

up to date with new Domestic Abuse legislation. The ROs enjoy access to all the same training and development opportunities made available for managers and social workers within the department.

- 5.4 Review meeting records have been fully embedded and are written to the child or young person in sensitive language. Shadowing and learning from the best examples of the 'My Review Report' continues to be a key element of induction of new starters in the service as those with previous management or reviewing experience are not all familiar with our methodology when they start in the role with us. All new permanent starters have been facilitated with a full two-week induction period and a specific induction programme for all is being developed.
- 5.5 The ethos of the service is one of collaborative learning through the development of group supervision and reflection sessions. Reviewing Officers have been committed to the goal of achieving excellence for children and young people and have attended where possible all Getting to Excellence seminars. Themed reflective sessions have led to the establishment of four task and finish groups among our Reviewing Officers to contribute to four work streams of the service plan. For our children looked after these groups have concentrated on our model for participation of children and young people in their reviews and the continuous improvement of IRO records and recommendations. Our Reviewing Officers are enthused by imminent developments such as receiving training from the members of LinCC.

### ***Midway reviews to track progress of plan***

- 5.6 Reviewing Officers routinely coordinate midway reviews to track the progress of care plans between reviews and consult with children, young people and their carers where this is in a child's best interests. The greater visibility of Reviewing Officers involvement and providing a critical friend voice through their interventions and 'footprint' on children's social care records has been recognised through the undertaking of Practice Assurance Stocktakes of the Leaving Care and Children Looked After service areas between January and April 2021. The challenge, now that the service began to show signs of a new stability at the end of the year, is to achieve consistency across the Reviewing Officer group. Moving forwards the RO footprint will be embedded in to reporting from our new social care electronic records system, so that weekly tracking of midway reviews will be able to be undertaken by the management team alongside Reviewing Officers. This will further solidify this aspect of the reviewing role and will

enable greater scrutiny therefore of the quality and impact of tracking between reviews. This tracking leads to more timely escalation where IRO recommendations are not being taken forward from analysis of the use of the Dispute Resolution Process in 2020-21.

### ***Quality Assurance and Monitoring***

- 5.7 IRO footprint on the children's and foster carers' files provides evidence of oversight and challenges. The CLA Review Preparation Checklist and Monitoring document is a tool to provide qualitative and quantitative oversight of care planning for each child in the pre-meeting (IRO and social worker meeting before the review) in advance of reviews that ROs undertake. These meetings help ensure statutory requirements have been completed or are in progress, confirm the care plan as well as identifying areas of good practice or where challenge is required. They also ensure that any contentious issues can be discussed more discretely so that these do not affect the quality of the child or young person's review meeting. Practice will develop in 2021-22 so that these pre-meetings are part of the relational aspects of the Reviewing Officer's work with children and young people and will include the pre-review consultation with young people to ensure their full participation in the planning and delivery of their review meeting. It is intended that this practice will contribute to fuller participation of children and young people and will form part of feedback that will be sought from children and young people about every review so that the service can analyse feedback to help improve how it delivers the reviewing role. This tool also supports RO managers to track work with individual children in addition to identifying any trends across a specific team or service along with any practice issues.
- 5.8 The Midway Monitoring Review provides an opportunity for the IRO to track and quality assure the progress and timeliness of planning for children. When required, challenge is raised using the Dispute Resolution Form. This form has been fully embedded and escalations on behalf of our children looked after rose from 22 in 2019-20 to 66 in 2020-21. It is evident from analysis that escalation about care planning from Reviewing Officers is more prevalent in the earlier stages of children's journeys through our services, particularly where children are experiencing delay in permanence being achieved where there can be extenuating circumstances such as delay caused in family court proceedings. Where children have achieved permanence and receive a specialist service from our Children Looked After social workers, there is less identified need by ROs to escalate and so lower instances of Dispute

Resolution. This differential was tested by our Practice Assurance Stocktakes in January and April 2021 of our Leaving Care and Children Looked After services, and it was evident that Reviewing Officer escalation appeared timely and proportionate for the small number of children where this action was helpful in specific circumstances.

### **Strengthen the quality of permanency planning for Looked After Children**

- 5.9 The Reviewing Officers have continued to ensure that children aged 0-5 years have 3 monthly Reviews rather than the statutory 6 monthly reviews. This practice is embedded and has focused planning by the local authority to reduce the delay for young children and has seen an improvement in the attainment of permanency through adoption and Special Guardianship Orders. Permanency planning for older children has strengthened but requires the RO to remain active to drive this in an ongoing manner until achieved. Reviewing Officers ensure their views are considered at Permanency Planning meetings through their Group Manager, who attends and, on some occasions, chairs this regular panel.

### **Children’s participation in and satisfaction with Reviews**

- 5.10 Children participate in the review process in many ways. Children and young people are supported and encouraged to take part in the review of their care plan as they feel most comfortable with. Some like to attend the meeting for a brief period, whilst others prefer to take part in the whole meeting, while others do not attend but share their views with their RO, foster carer or keyworker. In this recording period there were 1074 review meetings, with children and young people attending over 70% (includes all forms of attendance) in person.

	<b>Participation Code</b>	<b>Nos</b>	<b>%</b>
PN0	child under 4 at the time of review	186	17.3
PN1	child attends and speaks for themselves	532	49.5
PN2	child attends and an advocate speaks for them	23	2.1
PN3	child attends and conveys their views non-verbally	5	0.5
PN4	child attends but does not speak for themselves/convey their views	10	0.1
PN5	Child does not attend but asks advocate to speak for them	34	3.2

PN6	child does not attend but conveys their feelings to the meeting	239	22.2
PN7	child does not attend or conveys their view to meeting	45	4.2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1074</b>	

5.11 There is a strong sense of the participation of children and young people in their reviews. There were 82 more reviews undertaken in 2020-21 than in 2019-20, which reflects a slight increase in our cohort of children aged under 4 at the time of their review, and a slight increase in overall numbers of children looked after. Only 4% do not participate in some form, although we would like to see more children and young people attending their review meeting in person and feeling able to play an active role in the meeting. Some young people attend some but not all their reviews, and this can depend on how they are feeling at given times as well as some young people who have achieved long standing permanence can prefer to have less intrusion in terms of statutory meetings. The pandemic has had two significant impacts. Firstly, some children and young people are uncomfortable with virtual meetings. Secondly, facilitating genuine participation with younger children aged between 4 and 7 has been particularly challenging for Reviewing Officers via remote methods which can impact on the child's voice among this age group of Reception to Year 2 age school children. With restrictions now significantly eased, our Reviewing Officers will be working closely with our Children Looked After service to prioritise the children and young people who will now benefit from a long-delayed resumption of small face to face review meetings. To improve participation, we have sought stability among our RO group and the recruitment of ROs who demonstrate deeply held motivation to work directly with young people and build helpful relationships. We are working closely with the LinCC to improve participation and Reviewing Officer's relationships with children and young people.

5.12 The service significantly improved its return of written feedback booklets by way of consultation. This is evident from children and young people but also from foster carers. The return from parents remained static. Feedback from young people is that they can be put off by some of the questions, but also young people see pre-review consultation as something that they would most likely complete if their Reviewing Officer contacted them and did the form with them. This is to be trialled and implemented. It is clear from review records that ROs consult fully with children and young people in line with their wishes, and there is no evidence regionally that the most

common paper or virtual form methods are successful for pre-review consultation where the forms are not followed up by anyone having a direct conversation with children and young people.

- 5.13 During the reporting year, 196 consultation forms were received, an increase from 95 forms received in 2019-20. This breaks down in to 76 forms (an increase from 51 the previous year) received by ROs as part of the review consultation from children and young people, 102 forms received from foster carers (an increase from 31 the previous year) and 18 forms received from parents (a small increase from 13 the previous year).
- 5.14 Foster carers and parents have been routinely invited to attend reviews or consult with ROs through a separate meeting if it is assessed to be unsafe, not in a child's best interests or contrary to a child's wishes and views to have a parent or foster carer present in their review meeting.

### ***Dispute Resolution Processes***

- 5.15 The Reviewing Service experienced difficulties evidencing the formal challenge function of the role during 2019-20 year through its use of the Dispute Resolution Protocol (DRP). As this process embedded in the electronic recording system, the number of practice alerts increased threefold from 22 in 2019-20 to 66 in 2020-21. This was underpinned by a weekly performance report shared with Heads of Service. ROs are expected to have case discussions with their line managers if they are considering whether a practice escalation should be raised. This is improving performance and the RO footprint is now found consistently on children's records. The management group has worked hard with ROs to support them to take a system-based approach to escalation as this promotes a more impactful outcome for children. Two positive examples of this approach during 2020-21 ensured improved structures are in place to identify when a young person being privately fostered may need to be offered Section 20 accommodation, while another led to improvements in joined up care planning systems for new-born babies. Reviewing Officers can resolve different views about children's care plans without recourse to the Dispute Resolution Protocol but are expected to ensure their footprint is recorded on children's records where this occurs.
- 5.16 In total, there were 66 DRP forms completed by Reviewing Officers regarding children looked after. The Practice Assurance Stocktakes completed in January and April 2021 identified that these escalations were proportionate and lower numbers will reflect the increasing practice quality and strengths of the Leaving Care and Children

Looked After services. Those DRPs that were raised with colleagues across the services were purposeful and challenged different aspects of care planning, but particularly where there were delays in care planning, or care planning may not have considered all possible family and friend alternatives that may mean a child could be cared for within their birth family network. The escalation work of ROs is now reliably captured as part of ROs footprint on children's case records and is child centred and a meaningful part of the Division's wider learning culture. Most DRPs are resolved at the informal or first stage between Reviewing Officers and Team Managers, with only 3 of 66 escalations being progressed to stage 2 and Head of Service level.

### ***Impact of Staff Turnover***

- 5.17 Nationally recruitment of social workers is challenging, and Bromley have continued to strive for stability with the ambitious target of 90% or higher permanent social workers. We know that changes in social workers impacts on children and their relationships and can impact on care planning.
- 5.18 It is the RO Service's role to promote an optimum service to all our young people in line with national requirements. As with all posts that require a qualified and experienced social worker who has demonstrable management skills, the role is challenging to recruit to. The service has struggled to fill two part time posts with permanent staff and has seen a Reviewing Officer decide to leave her post to return to an operational management role during 2020-21. This means that we continue to have reliance on a low level of locum Reviewing Officers that can affect the consistency of reviews for some of our children and young people. Good recruitment continues to be a priority for the service and our current position gives grounds for optimism that the service may reach a fully permanent staff establishment during 2021-22.

## **6. Profile of Children Looked After in Bromley**

### ***Numbers of Children Looked After & Young People***

- 6.1 Following a steady increase in the number of children looked after in Bromley each year from 2016 to 2019, these numbers dropped from 348 children in March 2019 to

328 at the end of March 2020. At the end of March 2021, the number had increased again to 341 children. Bromley's rate of looked after children per 10,000 children has always been below the national average and remains significantly so at 44 per 10,000 children (compared with a national average of 64 per 10,000 children). The looked after population by gender is comprised of 58% males (at 31/03/21) and 42% females, so there continues to be a significant long-term disparity between gender.

- 6.2 The ethnicity of Bromley's cohort of children looked after gives evidence of significant disproportionality in relation to the demographics overall of Bromley's under 18 population. While this is not a Bromley specific pattern in the children looked after population (and those receiving Children's Social Care services overall), this pattern is being examined across services within the safeguarding partnership and is a priority within the refreshed Children and Young Persons Plan to help gain an understanding of how this pattern could reduce and be mitigated. The demographics of Bromley's looked after children population at the end of March 2021 was 58% White, 7% Black African, 8% Black Caribbean, 4% Black Other, 17% Mixed Heritage, 2% Asian and 4% are identified as Other. In total, 40% of our children in Bromley have Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) ethnicity. This contrasts with 23% of the overall child population in Bromley.

### ***Age profile of children looked after and young people***

- 6.3 The data continues to show, as in the previous year, that a higher proportion of Bromley's older children are living in care. In 2020/21, our cohort of 16- and 17-year old's living in care was however below the national average (32% of the looked after population in Bromley compared with a national average of 37%), while our 10–15-year-old age group constituted 40% of the looked after population, a reduction from 43% in the previous year, but slightly above the London average of 39%. This means 72% of the Bromley looked after population is aged between 10 and 17 years old. Younger children reflect national averages more closely, with 15% of children being aged from 0-4 years and children aged 5-9 years make up 13% of the looked after population. Older children tend to come into care because of child criminal exploitation (CCE, which includes the sexual exploitation of children) concerns, challenges to effective parental control, parental dysfunction and the breakdown of familial relationships, historical child protection concerns and/or previous social care

involvement. There is often an extra-familial contextual risk, that is particularly apparent for older males and can contribute significantly to missing from care episodes and the safeguarding responses that our Children Looked After and Leaving Care service regularly put in place for this cohort that contributes to the gender disparity in our care population. Older children entering care also often experience placement instability and can pose challenges in finding suitable accommodation. Two older children have needed, for their safety, to be placed in Secure Accommodation under welfare grounds during 2021/21. The Quality Improvement Head of Service conducts the Secure Accommodation Criteria Reviews that are held to review whether the criteria to be placed in such provision are met in the view of a panel on the date of the review.

- 6.4 It is understandable that older children have had life experiences and contextual needs that can mean they tend to find it hard to settle in placements, which can result in a series of placement moves. Older children are vulnerable to exploitation by adults and peers and are more likely to go missing from care. The understanding of missing patterns and themes for children looked after is being considered in the return home interviews, which are offered every time a child returns from a period that they have been missing from care. Our approach is that when one of our children does not return when they should we immediately report this to the police irrespective of the length of time they are missing. This is because risk to children is present in all periods of time that children are not where they are expected to be, however short or long that time is. The number of young people being reported missing has decreased during 2020-21 but the number of incidences of the cohort of young people who have gone missing has increased, reflecting the complexity of need presented by those young people to the safeguarding agencies.
- 6.5 The majority of children looked after are placed with foster families (72%) Of these children, 113 (33%) are placed with Bromley approved fostering households, while 94 children (27%) are placed with fostering households approved by Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). A smaller number of 42 children are placed with family and friends who are known as connected persons (12%), A higher number of 69 children (20%) with especially complex needs were placed in residential placements (these can include children's homes, infants living with parents being assessed in mother and baby units and residential schools as well as young people who are being detained on remand). At the end of March 2021, our number of children placed 20 miles or more from the borough has increased slightly from 16% to 18%. Whilst every effort is made

to keep children closer to home, some children are placed at distance because of their complexity of need and the location of the best matching placement to promote best outcomes, or for safeguarding reasons. There continues to be national concern about the sufficiency of foster placements for children and young people. This is under scrutiny by the government's review of Children's Social Care currently being undertaken. Our services consistently do well in planning and assessing how they can support young people to return closer to home, and this ethos was recognised within the Practice Assurance Stocktake of the Leaving Care Service in January 2021.

- 6.6 In Bromley during this recording period there were 192 children subject of Care Orders (56%, up from 51% at the end of the previous year), 74 children subject of Interim Care Orders (22%), 13 children were subject of Placement Orders awaiting adoption (4%), 60 children were subject of Section 20 accommodation (a reduction from 72 children at the end of the previous year) while 2 young people were held on remand (1%).

### ***Placement Stability***

- 6.7 Our services and Reviewing Officers maintain a constant focus on placement stability as it is fundamental to doing well in education and developing stable relationships. After a challenging 2019-20, our progress in improving both short- and long-term placement stability is a success story of our services and their joined-up working. Stability in well matched placements forms a key building block upon which our services deliver excellent care and support for our children and young people.
- 6.8 At the end of March 2020, 54% of our children had been in their current placement for two years or more. This rose to 66% at the end of March 2021. The number of children who have experienced two or more placement moves over the 2020/21 year has fallen from 10% (in line with natural averages) to 6% at the end of March 2021. We experienced fewer moves during the national lockdowns. When restrictions have eased, we have seen pressures increase for some young people and some moves have been unable to be prevented. Our services work closely together to learn from significant disruptions, identifying and responding quickly with creative support plans as soon as a risk of instability for a young person is identified, engaging partner agencies where necessary.

## ***Permanency Outcomes***

- 6.9 Permanency is considered at all stages of the child's journey. Where this requires a legal order, there is a strong Legal Gateway Panel, chaired by the Head of Safeguarding and Care Planning (East Locality), and legal advice is available from specialist lawyers within the council. Any delay in achieving permanency is subjected to the Dispute Resolution Process when needed and this includes escalating concern if the transition planning to permanence is not focused wholly on the needs of the individual child.
- 6.10 During this reporting period 26 children have been reunified home; 10 children have been adopted and 33 have been placed permanently with relatives under a Special Guardianship Order. 131 children became looked after during 2020/21 while 127 children and young people ceased to be looked after. At the end of March 2021, there were no children without a permanence plan who had been looked after for two months, although 17% of permanence plans were at a parallel planning stage to reflect that many children would be in the earlier stages of care proceedings where a definitive permanence plan is subject to a range of possible options or court proceedings had been delayed because of the pandemic. There is a focus on permanence with the Permanence Panel, which ensures that within 8 weeks of being accommodated there is oversight of planning for children. In 2020-21, we issued care proceedings for 121 children. Of these, 62% achieved permanence within their families via Special Guardianship Orders or reunification with birth parents while a further 27 children were reunified with parents with a Supervision Order outcome of the care proceedings. The length of care proceedings extended to an average of 48 weeks in the fourth quarter of 2020-21.
- 6.11 ROs continue to promote timely planning via the review process for young people who are accommodated under section 20 to avoid any drift or delay within the care system and ensure that a clear permanence plan is achieved by the second review. Increased scrutiny between children looked after reviews and the use of the Dispute Resolution Protocol is assisting in ensuring timely plans are achieved for children within their timescales. Children are considered at the Legal Gateway Panel if they have been accommodated under Section 20 for three months and Reviewing Officers feed their views into this panel through the panel membership of one of the Quality Improvement Group Managers.

- 6.12 Achieving placement stability for children and young people in care will remain a priority for the Reviewing Officers. The Group Manager for the IRO Service continues to contribute to the Placement Panel and will be challenging the service and professional networks around young people to strengthen placement stability for children and young people who have complex care needs.

## **7. Services for Children Looked After and Young People**

### ***Health***

- 7.1 The Phoenix Centre is responsible for children's statutory medicals and the Looked after nurses for the monitoring and oversight of looked after children's health needs. Information from the Looked after nurse indicates the physical health of the looked after population has been generally good with no significant themes arising. There are a small number of children with complex health needs who are being supported by specialist services within the children with disabilities team. 95% of children having an annual health assessment within 12 months (an increase from 91% in 2019-20), an increase from 95% to 98% of children fully up to date with their immunisations and a considerable drop from 88% to 45% of children having seen a dentist in the previous year at the end of March 2021. This drop has been due to the lack of availability of dental appointments due to the pandemic and some dental practices implementing policies of only receiving emergency appointments during the 2020-21 period.
- 7.2 All of our children have a completed strengths and difficulty questionnaire (SDQ) with an average score of 12.8. A score of 0-13 indicates that a child's emotional wellbeing is within the normal range. The questionnaire is used to identify children who need CAMHS or other wellbeing support. Although the SDQ scores are used to inform referrals to CAMHS, senior managers are also linking these into progress monitoring and care planning. Reviewing Officers check and consider how the SDQ score may affect the care planning needs of children and young people.

### ***Education***

- 7.3 The educational attainment of Bromley Looked after Children is primarily monitored by the Virtual School. There is an annual Celebration of Achievement event to recognise both academic and personal achievement of our looked after children. This was able to happen virtually during 2020-21 and saw the highest number of nominations to date.

Nominations were received from social workers, the Virtual School, foster carers and Reviewing Officers.

- 7.4 The Bromley Virtual School has been actively supporting children and young people in addition to social workers to find creative ways to provide education to those who have not had successful classroom experiences. These creative options have included home tuition to get children ready to return to school and alternative forms of education. Fewer of our children are receiving fixed term exclusions from school year on year. During 2020/21 this figure dropped further to 13 young people from 18 in the previous reporting year.
- 7.5 Every looked after child has a Personal Education Plan (PEP) to ensure they receive the support they require in addition to the Pupil Premium funding available to schools. The Personal Educational Plans are reviewed on a termly basis in the form of a meeting with the Virtual School Advisors, teacher, parent, social worker and carers in attendance. The Head of the Virtual School continues to monitor and report on the progress and the quality of PEPs. PEP performance is strong with 95% of children having an up-to-date PEP meeting at the end of the 2021 Spring term despite the stop-start nature of the school year and not all our children being able to attend school provision depending on their personal circumstances. Reviewing Officers scrutinise PEPs before each review to ensure that these are ambitious for children and are progressing meeting any additional needs in a timely way. This is especially important for children with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP) or who are considered to require assessment with a view to having an EHCP, as 41% of our children have an EHCP compared with 27% of children looked after nationally. We know that our older entrants to care often have needs that can be masked by behavioural needs. Joint working to identify additional needs with learning has improved through the regular attendance and input of the Virtual School at the weekly multi-agency Placement Panel, chaired primarily by the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Leaving Care. This has seen timely recognition of need and starting the Education and Health Care planning process.
- 7.6 Every effort is made to keep education stable especially when a foster placement is new and bedding in. Transport is organised even if this means transporting young people some distance if it is in their best interest and for planned periods of time. The Virtual School Head is on the distribution list for newly accommodated children and is

pro-active in checking on the possible impact of a move with social care. The Virtual School has worked hard to ensure social workers understand the education implications of their decisions. The Virtual School monitors the progress and attainment of Bromley's children looked after and young people with termly data collections. The analysis of data gives the Virtual Head her priorities in terms of providing challenge and support to schools on individual or group progress.

## **Advocacy**

- 7.7 Independent advocacy to support children and young people with specific issues about their care plan or the service they are receiving is available to all our children. The service is provided by Advocacy for All. We would like to continue promoting increased use of advocacy by our children and the advocacy service has been more successful to date in working with children who are subject of Child Protection plans. In 2020/21 there were 51 advocacy involvements, an increase from 25 advocacy involvements in the previous reporting year. The advocacy support for our children looked after is primarily to support their participation in reviews, accounting for 45 of the 51 involvements. Fifteen of these involvements provided support so that young people could participate in line with their wishes in their looked after review meetings. There were no specific involvements in relation to children subject of care proceedings, or children seeking independent support in relation to their contact with family and friends. There were two advocacy involvements in relation to post 18 transition plans for care leavers. Advocacy for our children is being actively promoted and the referral form has been redesigned in addition to the data set provided so that we can achieve an improved analysis of how we can strengthen the advocacy offer, as well as how we can promote more referrals, including self-referrals. Of notes is that only one self-referral has been made during 2020/21. This may be that young people lack confidence to seek an advocate or that they remain unaware of the advocacy service. Advocacy is discussed at every review and has a prominent page on the website for children and young people.
- 7.8 The IROs routinely check that the children and young people know about the advocacy service and how it can support decisions about their lives. It continues to be a challenge to translate this promotion in to use of this service by our children but as we move forward we will ensure that they have the choices and options available to them.

An improved data set will support this as referral reasons and sources can be better analysed.

## **8 Progress of developments and key priorities for 2020/21**

- 8.1 The Reviewing Service has achieved more stability and consistency, with one Reviewing Officer leaving her post and one Group Manager during the year. Further consistency was achieved by the successful recruitment of a locum Reviewing Officer into the vacant Group Manager post that this created. The service is highly motivated to build relationships with our children and colleagues, but the pandemic has hampered this with our Reviewing Officers necessarily working remotely throughout the year owing to the need to conduct meetings virtually throughout the period. The aim is to achieve a fully permanent staff group and there are grounds for optimism with permanent recruits in the pipeline that this goal is achievable. To support Reviewing Officers relationships with young people, there will be a close working relationship with LinCC which will include training for Reviewing Officers in this area, and a priority list of children and young people who will benefit from seeing their Reviewing Officer in person is in development now that restrictions have eased significantly.
- 8.2 The use of escalation and the Dispute Resolution Process has been child-centred throughout the year and commonly evidences a positive impact for young people. Practice Assurance Stocktakes have found that Reviewing Officers have escalated proportionately and in a timely way for children who receive support from the Children Looked After and Leaving Care services. Reviewing Officers can strengthen their final reviews with young people before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and this is an area regularly dip sampled by the management team and mentored through reflective group sessions.
- 8.3 The Reviewing Service has fully embedded its shared expectations of the tracking undertaken by Reviewing Officers between reviews and seeks to strengthen the footprint and involvement of the Reviewing Officer further during the 2021-22 year. The IRO footprint and use of midway reviews has been viewed favourably during the Practice Assurance Stocktakes of the Leaving Care and Children Looked After services undertaken respectively in January and April 2021.
- 8.4 Over time, the service is successfully growing its connection to the Corporate Parenting work streams and with the work of LinCC and CFCL. The Head of Service has presented to LinCC to seek their agreement to prioritise the participation in reviews

of children and young people and this work will be taking off during 2021-22 as a priority area for our young people to support improvement.

- 8.5 The service is leading alongside the Principal Child and Family Social Worker the development of a department wide methodology for gathering regular feedback from all our children, young people, and their families. This will be implemented during 2021-22, having been impacted by priorities related to the pandemic during 2021-22.

## **Priorities for 2021-22**

- 8.6 The Reviewing Service will achieve stability and increase permanent staff to the group. This stability will support the successful building of relationships with children and young people with new skills being learned directly from our young people themselves. The stability will also support the service to achieve its goal of all looked after reviews happening within timescale.
- 8.7 The use of case escalation will continually demonstrate a curious and appreciative systems-based approach to contribute to learning across the services when we make mistakes, or our systems don't work as intended for children and young people. Case escalation will demonstrate support and robust challenge where necessary but will not focus on achieving set numbers at the expense of the quality of the escalation and its impact for a child.
- 8.8 The Reviewing service will be increasingly visible with its overview and tracking of the progress of care plans and participatory with colleagues as they develop plans to meet children's needs. Reviewing Officers will always consult with children and young people several weeks before their next review, this will be helped by a stable and consistent staff group that is therefore able to form relationships that will see young people look forward to their reviews as a space where they can influence and shape the service and support that they receive.
- 8.9 That a consistent and defined training and development package for Reviewing Officers be developed alongside a training inventory of all staff in the service.
- 8.10 We will have a clear sense of young people's experience of reviews and develop our methodologies for consultation, feedback and practice observation in a way that reflects the Bromley Relationship Model (BRM) and demonstrates our ambition to

achieve excellence. We will analyse the feedback and demonstrate changes in how we practice and fulfil the reviewing role from this.

- 8.11 We will lead on improving the take up of advocacy support by children and young people, including the quality of data and analysis of the advocacy given by our commissioned service.

## **9. Conclusion**

9. The Independent Reviewing Service experienced a year of increased stability and grew into a service that consistently demonstrated its footprint and impact for children and young people, challenging care planning where this was due and in a more structured and visible way. Performance improved with 94% of reviews now held within timescale. Challenges were faced particularly in finding a lasting solution to the need to use locum Reviewing Officers, particularly to cover two legacy part time posts within the service. The positive work of the service has increasingly been recognised through the Practice Assurance Stocktakes led by our external consultant and the Quality Improvement service has increased its role in this work as well as in the practice reviews that underpin these stocktakes.
- 9.2 There remain challenges for the service to demonstrate good quality relationships with young people which in many ways has been hampered by a relatively new group of Reviewing Officers and the restrictions of the pandemic. This work will include continued strengthening and collaborative working partnerships with all our colleague services to build a culture of appreciation and understanding of the unique role that Reviewing Officers hold within the Children's Social Care Department, and how this can be put to the most effective use.

