

# Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2019 / 20

1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020

## Executive Summary

It is a statutory requirement for the IRO Manager to produce an Annual Report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Board regarding the structure and performance of the IRO Service and the delivery of services and outcomes for children in care.

This report outlines the positive impact of wide reaching reform of Children Social Care Services undertaken in York during 2019-20. York was established as a Social Work Academy with new Frontline Service. Services were reconfigured with a new Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub, separate Assessment Teams, integrated Social Work and Family Support Teams and Court Team. The Quality Assurance Service was expanded to include a team of Advanced Practitioners reporting to the Principal Social Worker alongside the IRO Service to help embed clear practice standards and robust learning culture. Responsibility for oversight of children in need of family support services transferred from IROs in June 2019 to the newly integrated safeguarding teams, enabling the IRO service to focus on children in care and subject to safeguarding arrangements.

Recalibration of social work services resulted in an anticipated peak in the number of safeguarding enquiries and children being made subject to child protection plans and coming into care. Consequential rise in caseloads was matched by expansion in the IRO service to help maintain robust scrutiny and service development.

Prior to the above the ratio of children in care in York had been lower than National, Regional and comparator levels but by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 it was more aligned with other authorities (70.8 per 10,000 - sitting between the 2018-19 comparator average of 61 and the regional average of 74 per 10,000).

94% of children in care who participated in the CYC 2019 Tell Us Survey reported that they feel safe and happy where they are living, although availability of local provision is an ongoing issue, resulting in some children needing to be placed outside of the city, contrary to their assessed needs. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 there were 262 children in care, but just 114 CYC fostering households with reliance on a high number of externally commissioned residential and foster placements.

The 2020-2023 Sufficiency Duty Strategy, the Permanence Strategy and the Adolescent Strategy will set out plans to address these gaps in local care provision and ensure that the right children are in care for just the right amount of time. IROs will be instrumental in helping to implement these strategies, providing additional safeguard to ensure robust intervention to maintain children with their families where this is right for them, that there is no drift in children coming into care when this is required and that the most appropriate long term home is swiftly secured for them for them, including supported return to family where this can be safely achieved.

The Corporate Parenting Board are respectfully asked to note the continued need to:-

1. Maintain IRO caseloads within recommended statutory guidelines to enable IROs to undertake effective consultation with all children, robustly oversee implementation of plans and escalate any issues of potential concern.
2. Raise placement stability by increasing sufficiency of local placement provision and reduce use of out of area and independent care provision as outlined in 2020-2023 Sufficiency Strategy.
3. Build in social work sufficiency to reduce reliance on agency workers as is being achieved by the local recruitment drives and expansion of the Frontline and social work academy

The 2020-21 IRO service plan sets out how the IRO are taking these developments forward into 2021.

- **Promote the voice and influence of children in care** – ensuring we listen to children and act on what they tell us
- **Achieve permanency for children in care**- ensuring all children are living and being cared for in suitable arrangements that they are happy to call home.
- **Promote positive Family Relationships and Identity** – helping children who can safely remain or return to their families to do so, whilst helping those who can't to stay in touch with the people who are important to them
- **Promote best outcomes for children in care**- ensuring that we support all children and their carers to be ambitious and supported in what they seek to achieve and celebrating all successes.

## **1. In accordance with York CYC mission statement 'Every conversation starts with the child'.**

1.1. No one knows better how we are doing for children in care than the children themselves. In York there is a well-established Children in Care Council, Care Leavers Forum and younger children's participation group (Show Me That I Matter, I Still Matter and I Matter Too). The groups provide frequent information about what works well for children in care and how they would like services to be developed. Key messages from these groups are that children should be listened to more and that workers need to be honest, reliable, and consistent and fun.

1.2 CYC's Advocacy Service facilitate a bi-annual survey for children in care. Key messages from the 2019 U Matter Survey were that 94% of children in care who completed the survey felt happy and safe where they are living and have an adult they can talk to and trust, most knew how to contact their social worker and knew how to access support. Most had a good awareness of their rights and entitlements, with care leavers being particularly positive about the support they receive. 76% (44) of young people said if they had ever been unhappy about a placement, they were able to talk to their social worker or carers about this. 93% (52) of the young people who responded felt that they have received the help and support they need to keep in touch with their family and 87% (47) stated that they had the support that they needed to keep in touch with their friends.

1.3. The 2019 U Matter survey also highlighted that some children in care had not received written information about the support available to them, or opportunity to visit before they move somewhere new, and some wanted to be more involved in planning their personal education and child care review meetings. 76% said they attend their review, but only 68% said they know who their IRO is, only 63% said they had opportunity to speak to their IRO ahead of their review and only 53% felt they had been involved in the decisions made about them. This feedback influenced work undertaken in 2019 to update the 'New to Care Packs' and Child Care Review toolkit and was a driver in restructure of the IRO service.

## **2. Legal Context**

2.1 The roles and responsibilities of the IRO are defined in statute via:

- The Children Act 1989
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002
- The Children Act 2004
- The Children and Young People's Act 2008
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010
- IRO Handbook 2010

## 2.2 The IRO's statutory responsibilities are to;

- monitor the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent and alert senior manager's to any issues of concern / report on good practice
- ensure that children's care plans are based on a current and informed assessment, and provide an effective response to the child's individual needs and aspirations ;
- identify and address any gaps in the assessment process or provision of service;
- provide a safeguard to prevent 'drift' in care planning and the delivery of services;
- ensure that the child's voice, wishes and feelings are reflected in the plan and that the child fully understands the implications of any changes to their care plan
- ensure that the child understands how an advocate could assist them and their entitlement to one

## 2.3 To help achieve this

- All Looked after Children have a named IRO who remains a consistent figure during the child's journey through care as far as is reasonably practicable.
- The IRO chairs a meeting to review the child's care plan within 20 working days of any new care episode, then within 3 months and then at least every 6 months or sooner if a change to the care plan is proposed.
- The IRO consults with the child as part of their review process, making sure that the child understands and can make a genuine contribution to plans for their care; understands the implications of any changes and understands their entitlement to legal advice or independent advocacy and how these could help
- The IRO provides challenge and support to social workers, their managers and partner agencies to help ensure pursuit of best life chances for the individual and collective child in care
- The IRO service oversees the formulation and implementation of care plans, tracking progress against planned outcomes, identifying any potential drift and raising challenge via a formal resolution process which includes the ability to access independent legal advice and refer concerns to Children and Families Court Advisory Support Services.

## 3. Profile of the IRO Service

3.1 The Independent Reviewing Service is sited within the Quality Assurance Group in Children's Social Care, based at the city centre CYC office alongside the CSC management team, social work teams and Children's Rights and Advocacy Service. This co location of services significantly assists with the maintenance of strong links and effective integrated working practices across the directorate.

3.2 In summer 2019 significant reform of Children's Social Care Services in York was implemented to help ensure swift and focused intervention for children at every stage in their care journey. More specialist social work teams were established including establishment of a new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, new Assessment Teams working alongside the Immediate Response Team and Family Group Conference coordinator, new integrated Safeguarding and Child in Need teams (where social workers and child in need practitioners worked together rather than in separate teams) and establishment of a new court team, in addition to the pre-existing Children in Achieved Permanence team and Assessment / Commissioning and support teams.

3.3 As part of this service restructure IROs were regraded to the level of team managers and the Quality Assurance Service was expanded to include a team of Advanced Practitioners reporting to the Principal Social Worker alongside the IRO service to help embed a learning culture and drive improved expectations and standards across the directorate. IROs increased impact was further enabled by reduction in average caseload size achieved by transferring oversight of planning for children receiving family support services from the IROs to the new integrated CIN and Safeguarding teams, enabling the IROs to focus on children in care and those subject to child protection plans.

3.4 During the course of the year the IRO service has recruited an additional 2 full time equivalent posts, such that by 31st March the IRO team consisted of:

- 1 FTE Service Manager who reports to the Quality Assurance Group Manager – independent of CSC service delivery
- 6 FTE IROs undertaking the Children in Care reviews and Child Protection Conferences (made up of 5 full time workers and 2 part time workers)
- 2 FTE IROs on fixed term contracts, temporarily employed in response to the rising number of children in care
- 1 FTE IRO (Placements) undertaking the foster carer's annual reviews, inspection of CYC's registered provision (The Glen) and quality assurance of externally commissioned residential care provision (two part time workers job share this post)

3.5 All 12 workers are White British, 10 are female and two are males, ages range from mid-30s to early 60s. Two members of the team taken on during Q3 were agency workers employed on a temporary basis to cover absences arising from maternity, sickness and bereavement leave that had arisen within the team. Two permanent posts were successfully recruited to during Q4, in addition to short term retention of the additional agency cover to future proof the service and help address anticipated additional demands arising from COVID19.

3.6 All IROs have at least 5 years post-qualifying social work experience and are registered with Social Work England. 7 current members of the unit have previously held manager roles in social work services including three who have held Head of Service roles. The other IROs have extensive experience working in referral and assessment, child in need, adoption and fostering services.

3.7 IROs and their manager access a diverse range of training appropriate to their development needs and the service also participate in the regional IRO practitioner's group and the regional IRO manager's group. In 2019 all substantive members of the team undertook 3 day training in change management / leadership to strengthen the team's capacity to drive service development and best practice initiatives.

3.8 All members of the team have monthly supervision and contribute to weekly team meeting and peer supervision sessions. IROs have also contributed to thematic service wide audits. Learning arising from these audits is reviewed in individual supervision and the collective data arising from the audits is shared and discussed with the team as part of team meetings to help inform ongoing service development.

3.9 The Independent Reviewing Service has contributed to practice improvement activity via delivery of multi-agency child protection training delivered on behalf of CYSCP, induction sessions for social workers and social work academy, participation in the Speak Up task group, Fostering Gateway meetings and active promotion of Advocacy Service and Service representation in Senior Management Team, Legal Planning and Permanence Tracking Meetings, Permanence Panel, Children in Care Partnership meetings, Child's Voice and Influence Forum and Mosaic User Group and Improvement Board. The service is also represented in a number of task and finish groups and the IROs each have a designated CSC service area link role to help disseminate 2 way information between the IRO team and other service areas about any emergent issues or new Team / Service area developments.

3.10 From mid-March 2020 restrictions on social contact arising from the COVID19 pandemic has been such that the IRO team have been working remotely from home undertaking consultations, meetings and resolution activity predominantly via telephone and audio / video enabled skype. The service was able to make the transition to remote working seamlessly without any tangible detriment to the timeliness or output of meetings although the process of remote meetings is very time intensive and has inevitably created some additional challenges. The team are currently looking at how they can continue to deliver relevant training via remote means during COVID 19 restrictions and make better use of e-based media to facilitate indirect consultation with children who can't be visited. The impact of COVID19 will clearly feature in next year's annual report.

## 4. IRO Caseloads and outputs

4.1. The IRO Handbook 2010 (Statutory Guidance) states that in order to carry out the IRO responsibilities as laid out in the Care Planning Regulations 2010 a full time IRO should have a caseload of between 50 and 70 looked after children. In York no IRO has ever been allocated more than 70 children in care, but they have always been allocated other work too.

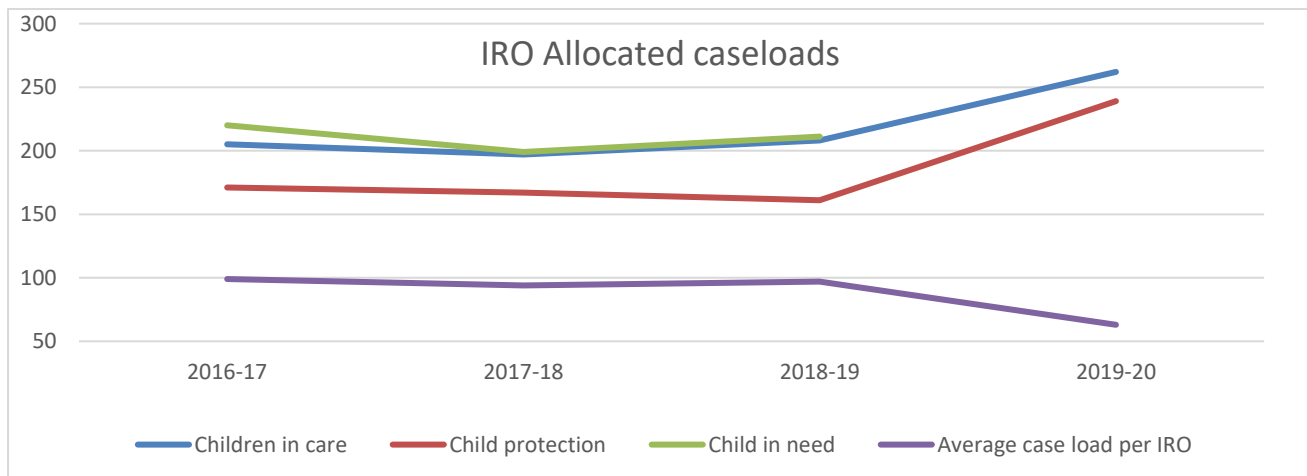
4.2. At the end of Q1 IROs were overseeing the planning for children subject to Child in Need plans and Child Protection Plans as well as Children in Care, and the team had an average caseload of 100. From June 2019 oversight of the CIN moved to the newly configured safeguarding teams so the IRO caseload immediately dropped by 200.

Table 1 : IRO caseload

Snap shot at period end	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2019-20
Children subject to CPP	171	167	161	172	228	235	239	239
Children In Care	205	197	208	224	235	240	262	262
CIN allocated to IRO	220	199	211	204	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of IROs	6 FTE	6 FTE	6 FTE	6 FTE	6 FTE	6 FTE	8 FTE	8 FTE
Average caseload size	<b>99</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>63</b>

4.3 Impact of the reduced caseload was not immediately felt by the team, as loss of the CIN work coincided with rise in the number of children coming into care and sharp spike in the number of children becoming subject to protection plans.

Graph 1: IRO allocated work – (based on end of year statistics).



4.4 This also coincided with some long term sickness and bereavement leave that arose within the IRO team which contributed to a reduction in the timeliness of some review meetings. This was particularly disappointing given the progress that the team had made in raising timeliness of meetings since the dip in timeliness that arose as part of the 2016 restructure. This is an area of improvement that has been subsequently addressed.

Table 2 Timeliness of IRO meetings chaired by IROs

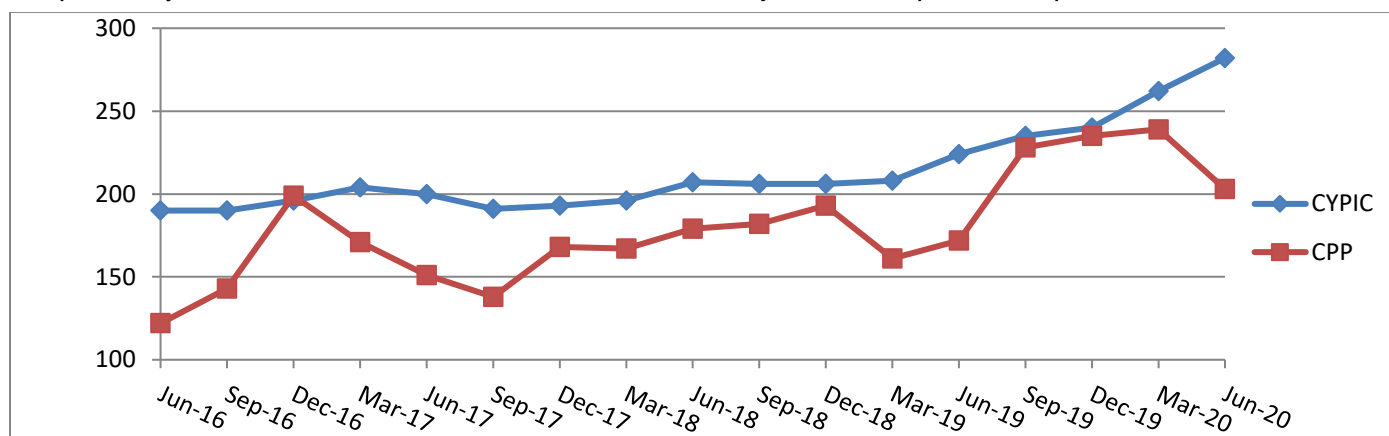
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018- 19	2019-20
Children who had all reviews in timescale	155	133	178	193	212
Children who has any reviews out of timescale	28	66	9	12	37

% children in care who had all reviews within timescale	84.7%	66.8%	95.1%	94.1%	85.1%
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## 5. CYPIC Profile, trends and placement sufficiency

5.1 Prior to the current reporting period the number of children in care in York had been fairly static for a number of years, and below the national and comparator local authority level, whilst the number of children subject to protection plans has been much more variable, and above the national and comparator LA levels.

Graph 2 : 4 year trend re children in care and children subject to child protection plan in York



	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1
CYPIC	190	190	196	204	200	191	193	196	207	206	206	208	224	235	240	262	282
CP	122	143	199	171	151	138	168	167	179	182	193	161	172	228	235	239	203

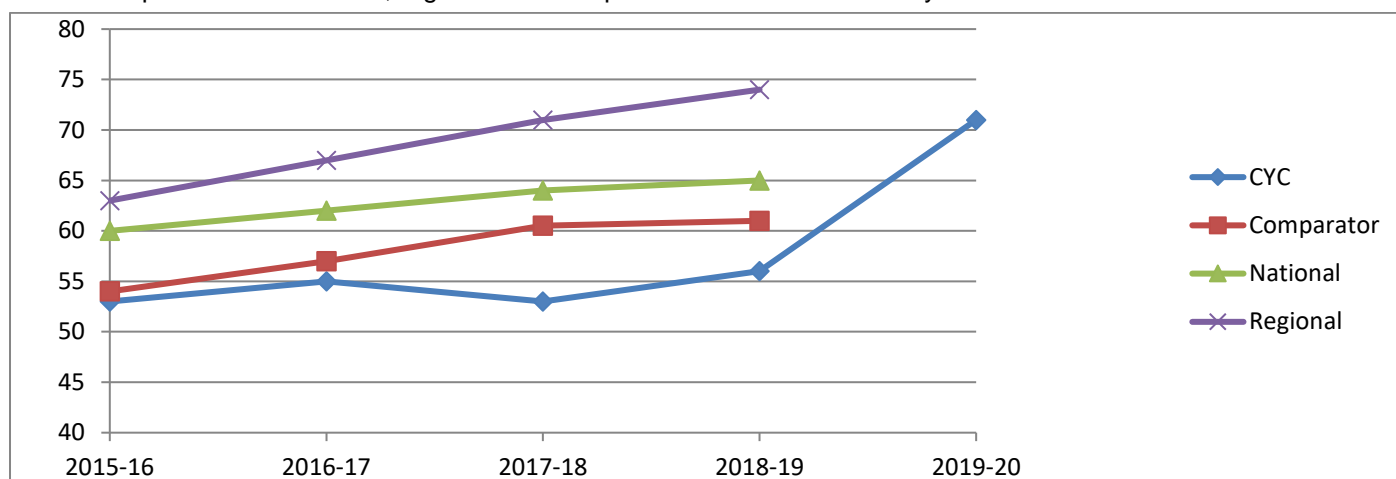
5.2 The static number of children in care had previously been regarded as a positive indicator of effective early intervention achieved via the Immediate Response Team, Family Group Conferencing and Local Area Teams. Extensive audit activity undertaken during 2019 evidenced that whilst this was a positive factor for some children, there had also been some drift in interventions for a cohort of children who experienced a high turnover of agency social workers. This resulted in delayed progress being made for some children subject to protection plans – this was a primary driver in the wider service reconfigurations and driver for reduction in IRO caseloads to increase the level of IRO scrutiny, challenge and impact.

5.3 There was a marked increase in the number of children being made subject to protection plan in York during Q2 and in the number of children coming into care in Q3. These increases were part of a conscious recalibration of social work intervention in response to the audit findings and coincided with reconfiguration of the IRO team, launch of new practice standards and launch of a new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The MASH was set up to robustly process new referrals and initiate immediate safeguarding processes or referral for other services as appropriate. This included brokered step down to early help services in the Local Area Teams or transfer to more specialist high intervention services such as the Immediate Response Team or newly formed Child Exploitation Team, where high intensity work is undertaken to address emergent concerns and help maintain children in their families, where this is the right thing for them.

5.4 The number of children subject to protection plan was still above comparator levels at the end of March 2020, (it has since come down), but the number of children in care was more aligned to rising national and regional trends. There were 262 children in care in York on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, equating to a rate of 70.8 per 10,000. This is above last year's national average of 65, but still below the Regional average of 74.

Graph 3 : The number of children in care per 10,000

York's comparison with national, regional and comparator LAs over the last 5 years.



2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	End of year snap shot data
53	55	53	56	70.81	CYC
54	57	60.5	61	Available Dec 2020	Benchmark - comparator Data
60	62	64	65	Available Dec 2020	Benchmark - National Data
63	67	71	74	Available Dec 2020	Benchmark - Regional Data

5.5 To help ensure that all children are getting the right support at the right time the IROs are overseeing decision making pre Initial Child Protection Conference to help ensure that there is consistent application of threshold and effective early interventions undertaken by Early Help, Immediate Response Team, Family Group Conference, Child Exploitation Team and Child in Need teams to help maintain children in their family's care where appropriate. IROs are also contributing to permanence and legal tracking meetings and routinely undertaking compliance audits as part of every child in care review, child protection conference and mid-point review, to help ensure that any potential for drift is quickly identified and addressed.

5.6 This increased scrutiny and diversion has resulted in a reduction in the number of children being accommodated under section 20 voluntary accommodation arrangements, with a higher percentage of children coming into care being children who were subject to abuse or neglect requiring court action to help secure permanence for them. Ongoing audit activity being undertaken by the IRO service is reviewing trends regarding conference activity and permanence planning to help ensure that high intensity services are targeted at the right children to improve parenting and divert the need for children to come into care wherever possible, or to help initiate robust pre proceedings interventions and contingency planning to move children onto alternative permanent carers as quickly as possible where this is the right thing for them.

Table 3 Legal status of children in care.

CYPIC by LEGAL STATUS	2015/016	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	
Snapshot at end of reporting period						
Interim care order -	30	20	30	28	63	↑↑
Full care order -	106	126	132	144	162	↑
Placement Order	9	5	5	13	11	
Accommodated under S20 -	44	52	29	22	26	↓
Youth Justice legal statuses	0	1	1	0	0	
Children in care detained on CP grounds	2	0	0	0	0	

5.7 The overall profile of children and young people in care in York has been broadly consistent across the last 5 years with little variation in the gender and just a small increase in those who are not White / British. (less than 5% variance). The changing demographics in York are not currently matched by the ethnic profile of the IRO team, wider substantive staff or foster carers, who currently continue to be almost exclusively white British. Increased use of agency social workers and managers has increased diversity amongst the



work force, with ongoing work being undertaken to try to encourage these workers to apply for permanent contracts. More work is being undertaken across the directorate as part of the Black Lives Matter initiatives to understand how well our care population reflects the changing demographics in York, and how we can best support any demographic minorities.

Table 4: Trend in age and gender of children in care 2016-2012 Number of CYPIC by Ethnicity

Snapshot profile at end of reporting period	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	Trend over 5 years
% of children in care - Male	51.30%	52.90%	54.30%	54.33%	51.53%	3% variance
% of children in care, - Female	48.70%	47.10%	45.70%	45.67%	48.47%	3% variance
% of children in care, Under 1	6.80%	5.40%	5.10%	9.13%	8.02%	4% variance
% of children in care, 1-4 years	9.90%	11.80%	13.70%	14.42%	19.85%	10% variance upward trend
% of children in care, 5-9 years	19.40%	17.20%	16.80%	19.23%	22.14%	5% variance
% of children in care, - 10-15 years	40.80%	40.20%	43.10%	36.54%	30.15%	10% variance downward trend
% of children in care, 16+ years	23.00%	25.50%	21.30%	20.67%	19.85%	5% variance
% of children in care white British	95.18%	93.56%	90.35%	90.47%	91.02%	< 5% variance downward trend
% of children in care other white	1.06%	0.49%	0.50%	0.95%	0.33%	<1% variance
% of children in care Asian	0.53%	-	0.50%	0.47%	0.33%	<1% variance
% of children in care Asian and white	2.13%	1.48%	1.79%	1.42%	0.66%	<2% variance
% of children in care Black caribbean	-	-	-	0.47%	0.33%	<1% variance
% of children in care Black carib and white	0.53%	0.49%	0.50%	0.47%	0.99%	<1% variance
% of children in care other black	-	-	-	-	0.66%	<1% variance
% of children in care other mixed	0.53%	1.98%	3.55%	4.28%	3.98%	3.5% variance
% of children in care other ethnic	-	1.98%	3.04%	1.42%	1.66%	<2% variance
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker	-	4	6	4	3	

5.8 The most notable change in the profile of children in care has been an increase in the percentage of younger children, the greatest increase being in children aged between 1 and 4 years and decrease in those aged between 10 and 15 years. This is reflective of recalibration of safeguarding arrangements with reduced incidence of children coming into care or remaining in care under voluntary agreement due to targeted interventions by Family Group Conference, Immediate Response Team and Child Exploitation Team.

5.9 Whilst the number of teenagers starting to be looked after is reducing, the cohort of children aged 15+ years still constituted 27% of the overall care population on 31<sup>st</sup> March. 71 of these young people will be turning 18 and leaving care due to age within the next 3 years. IROs are working with these young people and their social workers to help promote the need for robust pathway planning to facilitate supported moves to suitable accommodation. The revised sufficiency strategy is looking at how their predicted accommodation and support needs can be best met.

5.10 The IROs work proactively with all social workers to ensure the right permanence plan, legal status and living arrangement is in place for every child and young person in care. The Quality Assurance Monitor completed by IROs as part of every child care review confirms that IROs continue to be satisfied that almost all children have an appropriate legal status. Where concerns have been identified they have generally



reflected the increased focus on converting some voluntary S20 arrangements to care orders for children for whom a return to their family's care is not feasible, or concerns about delay in achieving discharge of care order for children who are successfully rehabilitated back to the care of their parent.

Table 5: QAF Data: Is the current or proposed legal status / placement appropriate for the child?

Appropriateness of care arrangements	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
In the IRO's view is the current legal status is NOT appropriate	1.04%	2.8%	2.24%	1.2%	1.7%
In the IRO's view current placement does NOT fully meet child's assessed needs	3.7%	2.3%	2.07%	2.2%	3.9%

5.11 IROs continue to report that almost all children are living in a placement that fully meets their needs. Where concerns are raised it is generally because a child has needed to be placed in a temporary bridging placement outside of York, due to absence of anything suitable within the immediate vicinity.

Table 6 : Proximity to York

Children in care living outside of York	2015/016	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
children in care living outside of York	70	79	80	83	122
% of children	36.65%	38.54%	41.03%	40.10%	46.56%

5.12 Some children are placed outside of the immediate locality for very positive reasons (for example to live with an extended family member, to distance them from particular safeguarding risks or to access specialised care), but there are a number of children whose needs would be better met if they could remain closer to family, friends and pre-existing support networks. Focused needs analysis has highlighted specific shortages in provision for children aged 9-11 who have experienced trauma, young people aged 12-16 who have experienced sequential placement breakdowns and no longer wish to live with foster carers and young people aged 16+ who require semi supported accommodation to help them make the transition into their own tenancies. The 2020-2023 CYC sufficiency policy sets out ambitious plans for how CYC intend to commission specific provision for these groups of children. In parallel with this CYC are also running a robust new recruitment campaign for foster carers and revising the Special Guardianship Support arrangements to avoid connected carers taking on the status of local authority foster carers as means to access support, where the local authority does not need to share parental responsibility with family members.

5.13 Despite the identified sufficiency difficulties, positive progress has been made in the current reporting period in the level of placement stability that has been achieved, with a reduction in the percentage of children experiencing multiple moves and a higher percentage remaining settled within the same placement for at least 2.5 years.

Table 7 Placement stability

% children in CYC care having 3 or more moves in the last 12 months snap shot at year end	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
	8.9%	7.4%	11.7%	12.2%	7.63%
Benchmark- National data	10%	10%	10%	10%	avail Dec '20
Benchmark – Regional data	10%	11%	11%	11%	avail Dec '20
Benchmark – comparator data	12.6%	12.2%	12.2%	13%	avail Dec '20
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20

% children in CYC care who have been continuously looked after for at least 2.5 years and have been in the same home for at least 2 years or are placed for adoption (snapshot at year end)	63.6%	66.8%	58.8%	56.5%	68%
Benchmark- National data	68%	70%	70%	69%	avail Dec '20
Benchmark – Regional data	70%	71%	70%	68%	avail Dec '20
Benchmark – comparator data	67.3%	68%	67%	69%	avail Dec '20

5.14 The majority of care episodes in York continue to end positively as part of a successful permanence plan, with the biggest cohort being children and / young people being supported to make a planned return / move to the care of parents or relatives, (20) children being adopted (10) or young adults moving into independent accommodation (15).

Table 8 : Reason care episode ended

REASON CARE ENDED	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/20
CLA Ceased, - Total - (YTD)	65	74	73	57	63
Adopted	3	9	10	8	10
To live with parent/ relatives without PR	9	3	4	3	5
Remand to LA ended	0	4	1	0	0
Age assessment determined aged 18+	1	2	0	1	3
Died	0	0	0	1	0
Care taken over by another LA	0	2	0	0	0
Return to parents/relatives	17	15	8	11	10
Returned to parents/relatives other than part of their agreed care plan	2	7	6	4	8
Child arrangement order granted	1	0	3	3	0
SGO made to former foster carers	1	6	7	0	0
SGO made to former foster carer who was a relative or friend (New 2018/19)	-	-	-	3	5
SGO made to other carers	5	1	5	0	0
Supported independent living	2	5	9	19	12
Unsupported independent living	0	1	3	0	3
Sentenced to custody	0	3	1	0	1
Ceased for any other reason	20	13	12	4	3
Transferred to Adult residential care	1	1	4	0	1

5.15 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 95% of care leavers aged 19-21 years were deemed to be in suitable accommodation and 63.75% were in employment or training, both higher than national and regional comparators.

Table 9: Suitability of accommodation and employment arrangements for care leavers

	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/20
Number of CYC care leavers aged 19-21 years (snapshot)	86	88	80	78	80
% of CYC care leavers aged 19-21 in suitable accommodation	89.5	88.0%	82.0%	77.0%	95.0%
Benchmark - National Data	81.6%	84.0%	84.0%	85.0%	avail Dec 2020
Benchmark - Regional Data	84.0%	86.0%	88.0%	87.0%	avail Dec 2020
Benchmark - Comparator Data	83.7%	84.8%	85.1%	83.3%	avail Dec 2020

% of CYC care leavers aged 19-21 in employment education or training	67.0%	74.0%	65.0%	56.0%	63.75%
Benchmark - National Data	49.0%	50.0%	51.0%	52%	avail Dec 2020
Benchmark - Regional Data	52.0%	50.0%	53%	51%	avail Dec 2020
Benchmark - Comparator Data	49.5%	52.0%	55.4%	53.4%	avail Dec 2020

## 6. The Review Process and Resolution activity.

6.1 A key responsibility for IROs is to ensure that the child's wishes and feelings are known and are influential in formulating the child's care plan. As part of every review process IROs must establish whether the child understands what the plan for their care is, and understands their rights and entitlements in law, for example that they can make a complaint, have an advocate to help represent their views or be supported themselves to apply to court under S8 of the 1989 Children Act regarding residence, contact, prohibited steps or specific issues. To achieve this it is expected that IRO's will directly consult every child as part of their review process to ascertain their understanding and views about the plans being made for their care, to clarify if the child feels any changes need to be made and to help the child understand the reasons why any changes are or are not made, ensuring that the child is supported to access advocacy if they are unhappy about any of the plans made on their behalf. Where the child's age or level of understanding are such that they are not able to directly communicate their views, it is expected that the IRO will still visit the child and their carers to make independent observation of the living environment and interactions with the carers to independently verify the social worker's view about the suitability of the arrangements.

6.2 Despite the teams' enthusiasm and commitment to undertake these direct consultations and better promote direct participation of children and young people in their care planning, the level of IRO's direct consultation reduced this year. This is the primary area for development moving forwards, which we intend to address despite the additional challenges of COVID19, via increased use of remote media and electronic resources (skype / facetime / Mind of My Own app etc).

Table 10 : IRO consultation

Percentage of Children separately consulted by IRO prior to Review	2015-16	2016-17	2017- 18	2018-19	2019-20	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
	35%	34.5%	34%	33%	26%	22%	30%	28%	25%

6.3 To help address this dip in consultation IROs continue to offer a consultation visit ahead of every review and they are now also seeking to undertake a mid-point catch up in between reviews. Where the IRO has not succeeded in speaking to the child it has usually been because the child or young person has declined the offer of a visit either because they are planning to attend / directly contribute to their meeting and don't feel that they need to speak to the IRO ahead of the meeting or because they prefer to have their views represented via their social worker, advocate or carer. It is essential that IRO caseloads are maintained within statutory guidelines to enable IRO's to spend the time required investing in and developing these qualitative relationships.

Table 11 : CYPIC participation in their reviews

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Child under 4yrs at time of Review	18%	17.4%	19.4%	25.5%	24%
Child attends and directly participates	41.3%	43.4%	40.7%	34.1%	28.9%
Doesn't attend but views conveyed	38%	31.3%	35.2%	39.7%	45%
Does not attend or convey views	4%	9.5%	6.3%	1.04%	1.9%

6.4 During the reporting period IROs reported that the majority of children and young people chose to participate in their review indirectly, sending their views either in writing or via third party consultation, with only 29% actually choosing to attend their meeting and directly participate (24% were aged under 4 years so didn't participate due to their age). Less than 2% children didn't participate in their reviews at all. These are usually the children and young people who don't want to identify themselves as being children in care, either because they feel they have outgrown the processes or because they are extremely well settled in a long term placement – often with connected carers). Ongoing work is being undertaken to try to promote the level of direct participation by children and young people in their review process.

6.5 In the period since the COVID19 restrictions on social contacts were introduced, IROs have been undertaking almost all consultations and meetings via indirect means, usually via a range of telephone, skype, zoom or whatsapp consultations. Some children have been receptive to video based consultations,

and a wider spectrum of children and young people are now choosing to talk to their IRO via these medium, however others report that they much prefer the face to face meetings. The IRO team are developing increased skills in using remote communication medium, and anticipate using a much more blended approach to reviews post COVID19, whereby those children who prefer not to physically attend their review meeting or physically meet with their IRO will be encouraged to share their views, and contribute virtually instead.

6.6 IROs are also seeking to encourage those children and young people who still prefer not to directly participate to share their views via whatever medium best suits them. This includes encouraging the sharing of a range of direct work tools (work sheets / drawings / consultation papers) , electronic consultation apps such as the Mind of My Own App and increased use of the Speak Up advocacy service. Intention in 2020-21 is also for IROs to be proactive in promoting use of the Mind of My Own App to collate feedback from children in care about their review process and how it can be better improved.

6.7 A key IRO function is to identify issues and trends in services provided to CYPIC, and report these to senior managers and elected members. IROs do this by routinely completing Quality Assurance monitoring data as part of every review process. The individual information arising from each review forms part of the child's review record and is immediately available to the child's social worker and manager to help inform practice, and collective data is available to the wider management team via live KPI reports and a weekly bulletin shared by the IRO service with the full management team.

6.8. Social workers have a statutory responsibility to advise the IRO of any significant changes impacting on a child's care arrangements , so that the IRO can independently consult the child and or other parties and make a determination about whether an early review is required to confirm any significant changes to the care plan, or whether any form of resolution activity is required to address potential issues of concern. In addition to this IROs are now also undertaking at least one mid-point check in between review meetings, where they also complete a dip sample checks to confirm the quality of compliance with practice standards. By actively monitoring progress in this way IROs are able to identify and address any potential issues of concern or drift and reduce the likelihood of the IRO being faced with unexpected developments negatively impacting on children. The outcome of these compliance checks and mid-point reviews are discussed with the child's allocated worker and their manager at point of completion and uploaded onto the child's case file, with recommended actions or resolution activity arising, where required. Collective information arising from the compliance checks is available as part of a live KPI report to all managers.

6.9 IROs continue to report that the placement, legal status, care plan and quality of corporate parenting are good for the vast majority of children , with the expectation that resolution activity is promptly initiated to address any shortfalls. Information about the issues raised in resolution is available to the full management team via live KPI report, and Formal Resolution Tracker and the IRO team provide summary information about this via weekly bulletin to the Senior Management Team.

6.10 Effective communication and escalation processes within children services management structure (and across agencies at a senior level) are such that major practice or resource issues impacting on a child's care experience tend to be quickly escalated and addressed without IRO needing to intervene. Issues taken into formal resolution have generally been raised with front line team managers or group managers - that have more generally arisen where a succession of workers has resulted in drift in some processes being completed that managers have not then been able to prioritise as part of informal resolution activity – such as delay in initiating health assessments, updating care plans / placement plans or drift in commissioning specialist assessment to help inform care planning, drift in seeking discharge of care orders for children who are successfully rehabilitated to parents care, or drift in pursuing conversion to Special Guardianship Orders for children very successfully placed with connected carers. Introduction of a permanence tracker reinforced by regular Permanence Panel meetings are now seeking to make it much easier for all members of the management team (and the IRO team) to easily plot and monitor where individual children sit on their permanence journey, so that any such drift is avoided or is easier to identify and address.

**See Annex A for breakdown of issues raised by IROs during 2019-2020**

6.11 IROs have raised concerns relating to poor preparation for the review (12.7%) poor quality or out dated Care Plans (8.8%), Health Assessments (5.3%), Education Plans (3.4%) and Placement Plans (3.9%). This year has seen a rise in the number of times that IROs have raised issue regarding frequency of social work visits (5.8%), and concerns about drift in completing recommended actions from the preceding review (6.8%). Introduction of the midpoint reviews and compliance audits, supported by introduction of a live IRO bulletin of issues arising, compliance tracker and resolution tracker and weekly reporting to SMT is helping to ensure that there is more robust and better evidenced tracking of case intervention. The senior management team continues to drive and support the need for improved reporting of completed resolution of agreed actions.

6.12 The most prevalent practice issue continues to be drift in timely assessments, social work reports and preparation for reviews, which is often linked to transfer of social worker. Children and families continue to make representation about the high turnover in social workers which arises either between social work teams, or because of social work sickness / vacancies and consequent reliance on agency social workers, or sometimes a combination of the two. The revised workforce development strategy seeks to address these issues.

### **Key issues that the corporate Parenting Board and executive are asked to note**

1. It is essential that the IRO caseloads are maintained within recommended levels (50-70 children) to enable effective consultation with children and young people, robust oversight of intervention and effective challenge to expediently highlight and address any emergent issues of concern affecting children in care and subject to safeguarding processes in York.
2. Some of York's children in care continue to live further away from York than is in their best interests. It is a priority that the council increase sufficiency of local placement provision and reduce use of out of area and independent care provision as outlined in 2020-2023 Sufficiency Strategy. It continues to be a priority to recruit, train and appropriately support a larger and more diverse pool of local authority foster carers and provide more generous and robust support for Special Guardians.
3. Some children continue to experience multiple changes of social workers and interim cover by different agency and duty social workers as a consequence of recruitment issues. It remains a major priority to maintain the significant investment being made within children's social care to improve recruitment, training, support and retention via the expanded Frontline Program and social work academy and enhanced employment benefits.

The 2020-21 IRO service plan sets out how the IRO service intend to achieve the following service priorities

- **Promote the voice and influence of children in care** – ensuring we listen to children and act on what they tell us
- **Achieve permanency for children in care**- ensuring all children are living and being cared for in suitable arrangements that they are happy to call home.
- **Promote positive Family Relationships and Identity** – helping children who can safely remain or return to their families to do so, whilst helping those who can't to stay in touch with the people who are important to them
- **Promote best outcomes for children in care**- ensuring that we celebrate all successes and support all children in care and their carers to be ambitious and supported in what they seek to achieve

Sarah Olorenshaw Service Manager Independent Reviewing Service

Appendix

Annex 1 - IRO QA data arising from Child in Care Reviews

Annex 2 - IRO service plan 2020-21