



We want all children in Warwickshire to be...



HEARD



SAFE



HEALTHY



SKILLED



HAPPY

## Corporate Parenting Panel

October 2023

### Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Service (The period of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023)

#### Recommendation

- That the content of this report is noted.

#### 1. Key Issues

- 1.1. The IRO Handbook, Care Planning and Case Review Regulations 2010, updated 2021 sets out how local authorities should carry out the full range of responsibilities in relation to care planning, placement, and reviews for children in care.
- 1.2. The Handbook sets out the function of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and how they should be supported by the Local Authority to meet their full responsibilities towards children in care.
- 1.3. This report fulfils the requirement within the IRO Handbook for the manager of the Independent Reviewing Service to provide an annual report on the service to the Corporate Parenting Panel for the scrutiny of members.

#### 1.4 The purpose of the report is to:

- Provide both quantitative and qualitative information about the performance of the service in relation to statutory requirements.
- To evidence that there is effective challenge by IRO's where there are delays or blocks to planning processes for children in care and that these are pursued until resolutions are reached.
- To provide an analysis of issues raised within any dispute resolution processes to aid and inform learning, practice improvement and service developments.
- To provide information on the participation of children within review and care planning processes.
- To identify any emerging themes and trends in respect to Services for child in care.

- To outline areas of achievement within the service, challenges the service has faced and goals identified for Service development over the next year.

1.5 The Handbook emphasises the need for authorities to utilise the information generated by Independent Reviewing Services to inform service developments and ultimately improve outcomes for children in care.

## 2. Purpose of the Service and Legal Context

- 2.1. Local Authorities have been required to appoint Independent Reviewing Officers since Statutory Guidance was first issued in September 2004. The core purpose of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to ensure that the care plan for children in care, fully reflects the child's needs, is progressed appropriately, and reflects due consideration of the child's wishes and feelings. Where blocks to planning are identified, the IRO must ensure that the matter is escalated until resolutions are achieved.
- 2.2. The IRO also has a duty to monitor the local authority's overall performance as a corporate parent, and to bring any areas of poor practice in overall care planning processes to the attention of senior managers.
- 2.3. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 followed by revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance came into force in April 2011. The Act extended the responsibilities of the IRO from monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's review to monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's case.
- 2.4. The IRO Handbook also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in establishing and supporting an effective IRO service.
- 2.5. The current Independent Reviewing Service was established in Warwickshire in March 1995. The service was therefore well prepared to implement the Statutory guidance in 2004 that placed IRO's on a statutory footing. The service has continued to adapt and develop in response to wider legislative change, statutory guidance and the messages from Research and good practice guidance.
- 2.6. Independent Care Review- Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation Children's Social Care Reform 2023- in which it was recommended that IRO service and Reg 44 Visitors are replaced by advocacy service. DFE has rejected the care review's proposal to abolish the independent reviewing officer role, stating the following:

*Advocacy services for children in care will not replace the role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) and Regulation 44 (Reg 44) visitors. We recognise the complexities and variability of practice nationally in these roles and acknowledge concerns raised by recent reviews. This includes the Panel's ongoing review of residential settings for children with complex health needs and disabilities. The Panel's early findings indicated shortcomings in both roles, and this will be considered further in their final report in early 2023.*

*As part of the wider review of the standards of care, we will review the effectiveness of both*

*roles to ensure they provide a vital and independent safeguarding check as part of the overall system. We will do this while carefully engaging children and care-experienced people. If necessary, we will consider other options, including responding to any recommendations from the Panel's final report.*

### 3. Profile of the Service

- 3.1. The service continues to be located within the Children and Families business unit with direct line management being situated in the Quality and Impact service (including Quality Assurance). This is consistent with the statutory guidance in that it provides sufficient independent location and line management from operational social work and directly linked to a quality assurance function. This location also supports the service to contribute to the broader functions of quality assurance, practice development and service improvements.
- 3.2. The team currently consists of an establishment of:
  - 15 Independent Reviewing Officers- of which 2 are part-time and 2 are on a secondment basis with the opportunity for 1 to be a permanent position.
  - 1 additional IRO's support the service between April and November 2022 assisting the service prior to the secondments. The local authority has continued to invest in the service which has had a positive impact upon our service delivery.
  - One Operational Manager
  - 2 Principal Independent Reviewing Officer have been in place since August 2022 to supervise the IRO's and support the Operations Manager with their new extended role of managing the Family Group Conference team and LADO.
  - A team of 4 Business Support staff, of which 2 are part-time (Managed and supported by the Business Support Unit). 1 is currently vacant due to a retirement but has been successfully recruited to.
- 3.3. Historically the team has been successful at recruiting internal candidates at team managers level especially since the regrading of IRO's salaries in 2019. This brought the service in line with the region, however, since the introduction of the enhanced team leader pay in Warwickshire, there has been less internal interest from team leader level in the IRO position. The IRO handbook states that IRO's recruited should ***be an authoritative professional with at least equivalent status to an experienced children's social work team manager***. The service sought to recruit candidates who have had at minimal of 5 years' experience as a social worker both internally and externally, who could have been working at team manager's level. Positively since November 2022 we have successfully recruited to all posts with the agreement of an additional IRO for a 12-month secondment to support the increase of Unaccompanied Asylum seekers and to support the team whilst an IRO moves to the position of Principal IRO.

- 3.4. The service prides itself with being able to give most young people the experience of continuity of an IRO throughout their time in care, as the service maintains some of the more experienced staff members. Some young people have experienced the same IRO's for 10 years plus which is an achievement the service is very proud of. There is also an even more robust allocation system which maintains stability of relationships and ensure allocations of IRO's within 5 days of being a child in care.
- 3.5. Within Warwickshire, Independent Reviewing Officers carry out a dual function acting as both independent chairs for Child Protection Conferences and the allocated IRO for individual children who are in care of the Local Authority. The service continues to regard this as a strength as it allows for child protection and statutory review processes to be coordinated with the same IRO chairing meetings under both processes. This supports effective information sharing, informed decision making and an emphasis on building relationships as a means of supporting effective decision making and planning.
- 3.6. The service is represented on several service development groups and therefore contributes towards the development of policies, procedures and strategies for effective safeguarding and care planning processes. IRO's connect regularly with children's teams focusing on supporting development in key areas of services and practice.
- 3.7. The Operational Manager of the service attends the Regional IRO Managers group meetings and this group feeds into the National IRO Managers Partnership (NIROMP). There are two IRO's who are now representing Warwickshire within the NIROMP group. This benchmarking group supports the development of Regional and National priorities to improve services, collaboratively with the DFE, wider partners and stakeholders.

## 4 Quantitative Information about the IRO Service

- 4.1. The IRO Handbook states that:

*"It is estimated that a caseload of 50 to 70 looked after children for a full-time equivalent IRO, would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service, including the full range of functions set out in this handbook. This range should reflect the diversity and complexity of cases across different local authorities."*

- 4.2. Throughout the year children open to the IRO team have been closely monitored to try to achieve a more balanced spread. Overall reductions have been achieved but this has varied depending on staffing levels, increasing demands for service and the need to gradually build up workloads for new staff whilst trying to achieve as much continuity for young people as is possible.
- 4.3. The table below illustrates the numbers of children in care or subject to a child protection plan in March 2023 compared to previous years. This means an average IROs experience an allocation of **76** children, the recommendation on workloads notes the need for managers to consider the *"diversity and complexity of cases within each*

*Local Authority*” (IRO Handbook). This is a decrease from last year which is positive and brings the service more in line with the recommended levels, there have been periods of times whereby the average has been much higher especially when the team have been waiting for new staff members.

	March 2020	March 2021	March 2022	March 2023
Children subject to CP plans	298	349	403	329
Children in care	754	860	815	777
<b>Total</b>	<b>1052</b>	<b>1209</b>	<b>1218</b>	<b>1106</b>

4.4. The overall workload within both areas has significantly increased over the last year, IRO’s/Chairs of conference’s are holding reviews more regularly for our complex families or to ensure their planning is in line with court processes or if there are causes of concern that requires close monitoring. There has also been the introduction of midway review meetings between IRO and Social Workers following every child protection conference to ensure and support the progression of child protection planning and address any delays at the earliest opportunity or bring forward conferences where safeguarding issues have reduced; IRO’s/Chairs of conference also attend keys meetings held by Children’s Services to ensure continued oversight as well as trying to prioritise seeing their children between review meetings, they also undertake peer reviews monthly and contribute to various monthly panels that are held by Warwickshire.

4.5. The different types of placements and care plan will determine differing statutory requirements in terms of reviewing frequency. The location of some placements has significant implications for time required for travel for IROs to enable them to maintain direct contact with children and their placements. The table below provides some detail of the variation in placement type.

#### 4.6. % of Children in Care in internal & external foster care at 31 March 2023

Placement Type of Children in Care at 31 March	31-Mar-20	31-Mar-21	31-Mar-22	31-Mar-23*
Foster placement with friend or family (WCC)	104	132	121	133
Foster placement with LA carer (WCC)	251	221	222	186
Foster placement with Agency/OLA carer	180	222	214	178
Independent Living / Supported Accommodation	82	82	83	96
Mother & Baby Unit	4	8	1	0
Placed for adoption	22	24	10	21
Placed with own parents	53	80	75	63
Prison/Police Custody	1	4	1	0
Residential Home/School	46	81	84	81
Secure Unit	3	0	1	1
NHS/Health Trust or other establishment providing medical/nursing care	5	3	2	0
Other Placement e.g Temporary / Unregulated	3	3	8	18
<b>WARWICKSHIRE TOTAL</b>	<b>754</b>	<b>860</b>	<b>822</b>	<b>777</b>

\*Data for 2022/23 is provisional as it has not yet been quality assured as part of our statutory returns process to the government.

- 4.7. There has been a national shortage of foster placements that has impacted upon the offer of placements available to children hence why there has been an increase in unregulated placement by 10 more than the previous year and our highest level in the last 4 years. The IRO service continues to have a level of oversight on unregulated placements and ensure that they are satisfied that the local authority has mitigated against any risk this might pose to the young person. Warwickshire does have a clear process of senior management oversight and decision making to ensure they are not prolonged unapproved placements. There has been an increase of children being placed with Connected Persons (friend and families) which is positive as this enables connections to be maintained for children as well as a decrease of children being placed with agency foster carers. All other areas of placement have remained at consistent levels from previous years, the service continues to support the local authority to secure permanency for our children, Special Guardianship orders, adoption, permanency in long term foster care and participate within the relevant permanency panels where permanency plans are scrutinized, and delays addressed.
- 4.8. The service continues to support the overall strategy within children's services to safely reduce the number of children in care and achieve timely permanency plans for those who remain in the care of the local authority. The service supports this strategy in the following specific ways:
- Clear focus on permanency planning within statutory review processes.
  - Independently reviewing the analysis of risk and planning within meetings
  - Ensuring the voice of the child, their parents and carers is evident in care planning.
  - Effective multi agency working
  - Robust escalation processes if there is delay or blocks to planning.
  - Application of Restorative principles and values within care planning and child protection processes.
- 4.9. The expectation within the care planning regulations is that the child's plan for permanency should be agreed by the second review (4 months after becoming looked after). If this has not been achieved or if the Local Authority decide to initiate legal proceedings more regular reviews are often required to match the timeframes for assessments informing plans to be presented and agreed within the statutory review process
- 4.10. If the IRO is concerned about any delays in planning that may require reviews to occur more frequently to ensure there is no drift in planning. There is also the range of activity involved in progressing escalations i.e. updating the child's records, liaising with other agencies, operational staff and the child and their family to support resolutions being reached.
- 4.11. The service also provides a Duty service which is available from 9.00am to 1.00pm daily. This duty service books in all requests for ICPC conferences and aims to support the consistent application of thresholds for child protection conferences. The service offers consultation to operational staff and other agencies. It also supports a number of the team's quality assurance and performance functions.

4.12. The IRO's have established a good relationship with the Children in Care Council and once again are re-establishing relationships with the newly appointed Participation Officer. All recruitment processes involve a representative from the Children's in care Council on the interview panel. This has proved invaluable in appointing the right staff to posts. Our last interviews were held face to face with the invaluable support from a representative from the Children in Care Council.

## 5. Qualitative Information

5.1. Despite capacity issues for half of the year our performance in key areas has remained relatively consistent with improvement in some areas. Some highlights are listed below and relate to data on 31 March 2023.

### 5.2. Timeliness of All About Me Reviews for Children in Care

*% Of participation of children within their All About Me Review process and Timescales of reviews.*

	2020	2021	2022	2023
% of Statutory reviews held within timeframes	Initial Reviews: 89.4%	90.4%	92.40%	92.20%
	Second/Subsequent: 93.20% / 91.5%			
% of looked after children who participated in their review*	75%	91.0%	90.00%	90.80%

\*This indicator excludes children aged under 4 at the time of their review

5.3. The percentage of young people participating within the reviews has slightly increased from last year. There have been several reviews in which workflows on Mosaic have been affected which has impacted upon our overall data. This remains consistent with previous years; this is an area that the service continues to focus upon linking in with Children in Care Partnership worker within the next year.

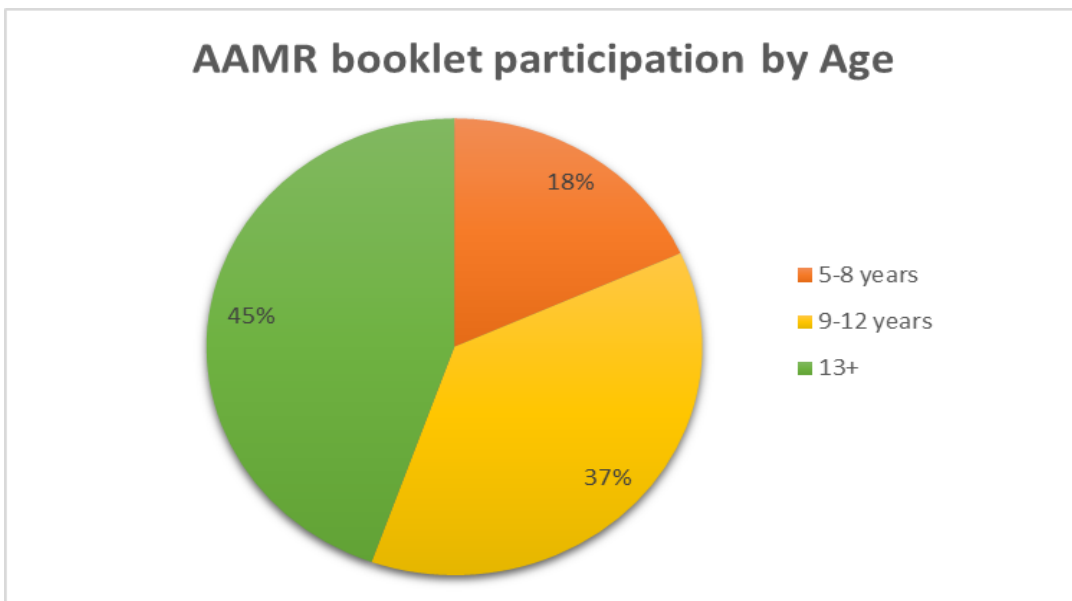
### 5.4. Statutory Reviews.

The above figures are reported upon from data gathered from the completion of All About Me minutes on Mosaic and does not consider those reviews held where workflows are missing due to either IRO or social workers sickness or unexpected departure from the council. Under these circumstances the meetings held were either uploaded onto ECSR as a word document or added to the child's case notes. A manual check undertaken showed that in fact a total of **80** All About Me Reviews were found to be out of timescale, and the service achieved 95.4% within timescale. A breakdown of those 80 out of timescale identified human error and miscalculation of dates or reviews that needed to go out of timescale at the request of social worker or young person/foster carers **59%**, **5%** Late allocation/late notification, **2%** date error set by a previous IRO, **1%** legal status not clarified, **2%** missing workflows and/or case note, **25%** sickness of IRO, as there was some IRO's off sick for an extensive period. A workshop has been held with IRO's to address the above issues and will be revisited during the year as a reminder.

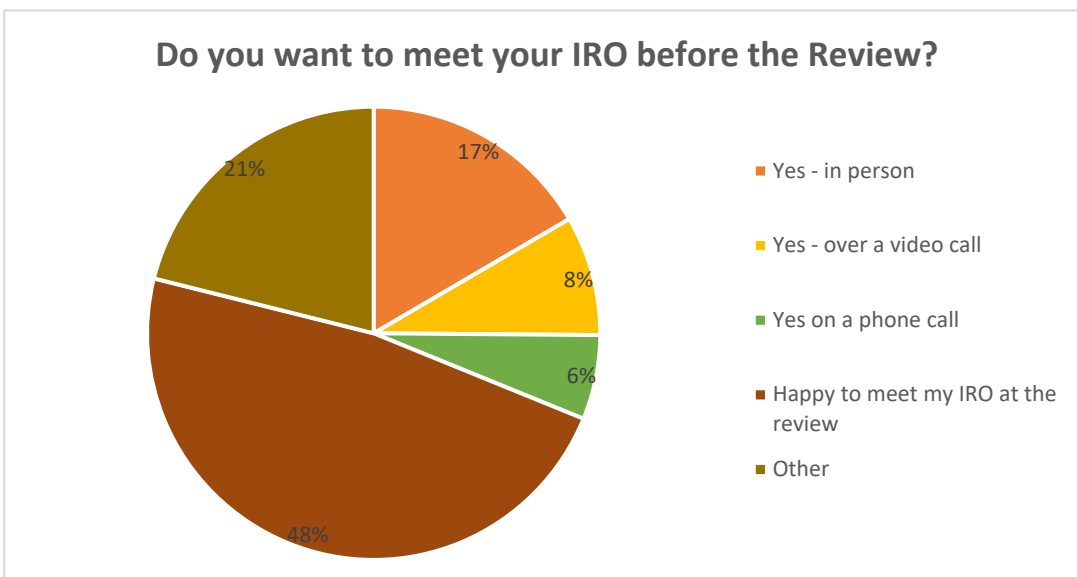
### 5.5. Participation of Young People

The service continually seeks the views of children in care via their consultation booklet which have been modernised and re-launched as of March 2022. They are now accessed via QR codes by the young person or with the help of carers or trusted adult dependent upon the child’s age and development. These are sent out prior to every All About Me Review. A care experienced apprentice will hopefully support the team to promote the completion of the consultation booklets as they are an effective form of communication between IRO and their young people.

#### % Of Booklets completed



#### Views of children/Young People’s contact with their IRO’s before their review.





## 5.6. Participation at Review

Team	PN0	PN1	PN2	PN3	PN4	PN5	PN6	PN7	Not Recorded	Grand Total
Bedworth and North Warks Childrens Team	40	55		1	3	1	68	14	7	189
Children in Care 14-18 Years	2	276	2			6	72	27	10	395
Children with Disabilities Team							1	1		2
Corporate Parenting		2								2
CwDT - Children in Need Hub		10	1	2	1	1	5	4	2	26
CwDT - Safeguarding & Support Hub	9	28		1	3	4	12	23	2	82
Disability Transitions Team		2						1		3
EHTS Social Workers	1								1	2
Family & Adolescent Support Team North		1								1
Family & Adolescent Support Team South		1								1
Initial Response East 2							1			1
Initial Response South 2	1							2		3
Innovate Team	2									2
Leaving Care 18-25 Years		18	1				4			23
Leaving Care, Children in Care & UASC		23				1	9		1	34
Nuneaton Childrens Team	57	62		3	4		73	13	8	220
Rugby Childrens Team	56	42	2	1	5	1	40	12	5	164
Stratford Childrens Team	59	39	4	1	5	1	57	18	2	186
UASC	2	211	10					4	5	232
Warwick Childrens Team	41	67		1	4		33	8	4	158
Youth Justice Service		5								5
Not Recorded	1	4	1				3	4		13
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>846</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>1744</b>

PN1 Attendance and Self Representation

PN2 Attendance - Views Represented by Advocate

PN3 Attendance - Views Represented Symbolically

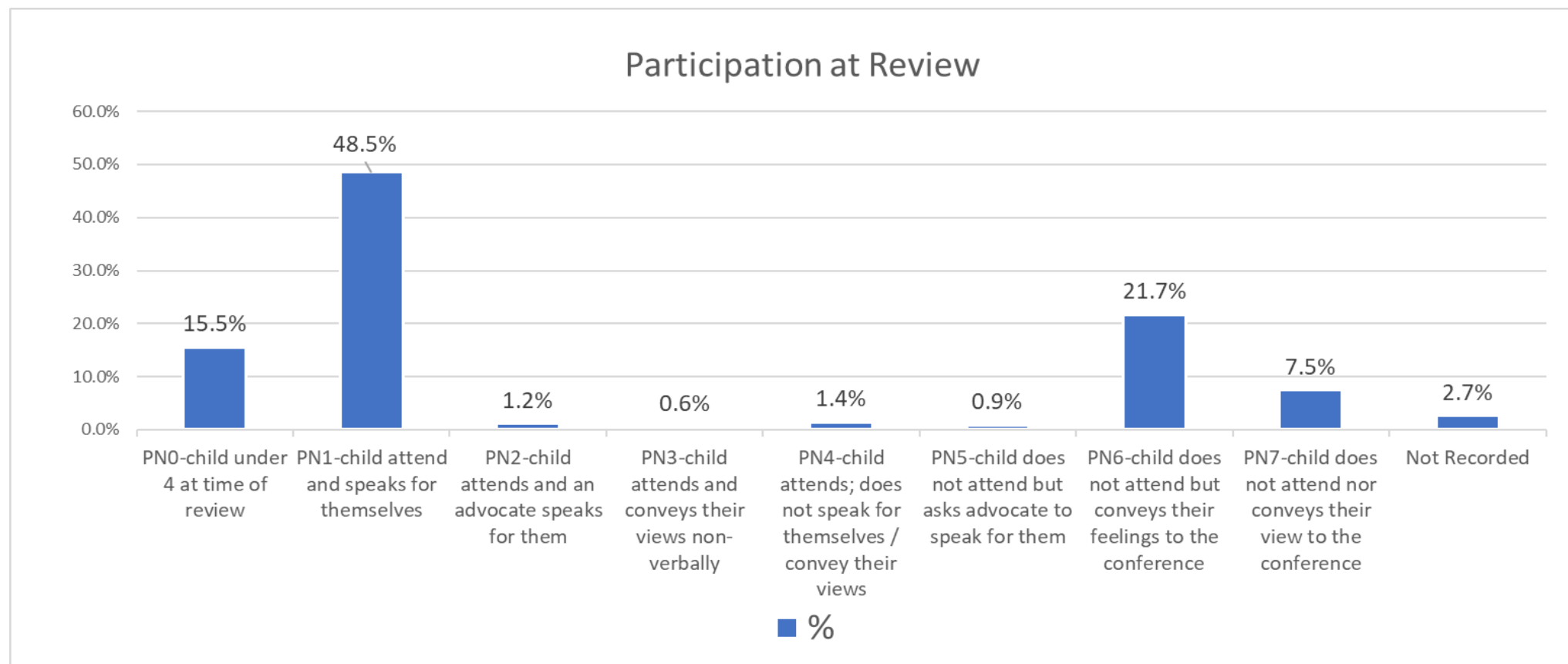
PN4 Attendance without Contribution

PN5 No Attendance - Views Presented by Advocate

PN6 No Attendance - Self Represented in Other Way

PN7 No Attendance and No Representation

5.7. The data produced breaks these figures down into teams and it is evident that older children in care (Child in Care Team 14-18 years) and unaccompanied asylum-seeking continue to be the young people who are more likely to directly attend their review. There have however been some interesting outcomes from the need to hold reviews virtually because of COVID19. IRO's have seen an increase in the number of young people who are more actively engaging both in their reviews but also in directly contacting IRO's outside of reviews. This appears to be a result of feeling more comfortable with using mobiles, skype or facetime as a means of communicating. This feedback is replicated from other IRO regional services, and we will be maintaining this level of communication ongoing, but we do recognise that we must be continually proactive in being creative about how we improve and maintain good participation. There appears to be a decreased use of advocacy service which the service will continue to explore with Barnardo's.



**5.8. Data regarding how the reviews were conducted - virtual or Hybrid\* in 2023:**

Venue of All About Me Reviews during 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023		
Venue	Number	%
Office	410	23.5%
Other	55	3.2%
Placement	419	24.0%
School	329	18.9%
Virtual	481	27.6%
Not Recorded	50	2.9%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1744</b>	<b>100%</b>

\* Hybrid meeting consists of some members of the review meeting attending virtually.

5.9. The service has been moving away from virtual meetings since October 2021 and overall, this has been achieved, but it has not been without its difficulties since covid-19 restrictions were lifted there had initially been a reluctance from schools and foster carers to accommodate the reviews on their premises as well as some professionals being reluctant to attend in person. The service has slowly started to see an improvement in face-to-face meetings being conducted above virtual. It is positive that there has been a continued reduction in virtual meetings from the year before, it is anticipated that they will continue to reduce further as families, young people and professionals become more confident with reviews being held in person. IROs continue to be creative in managing reviews whilst keeping to statutory requirements.

**5.10. Data regarding IRO's visits and contact with Children 2023**

Date Child Last Seen by IRO	Total AAM reviews completed between 1st January 2022 - 31 March 2022 (Part Year)		Total AAM reviews completed between 1st April 2022 - 31 March 2023 (Full Year)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Same day as review	113	30.10%	576	33.00%
Within 1 week of review	21	5.60%	89	5.10%
Within 1 month of review	43	11.40%	151	8.70%
Within 3 months of review	15	4.00%	132	7.60%
Over 3 months since last seen	9	2.40%	149	8.50%
Not Recorded	175	46.50%	647	37.10%
<b>Total AAM reviews</b>	<b>376</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1744</b>	<b>100%</b>

	1 January – 31 March 2022 (Part Year)	2022/23 (Full Year)
Number of children who had a case note of 'IRO Contact with Child/Young Person' created	209	646

- 5.11. IRO's ensure young people's views are actively incorporated into the review process either by their attendance, representation by a third party or by the Reviewing Officer meeting with them outside of the review meeting. It is accepted that there will be occasions whereby some creativity will be required as to how best to conduct a review meeting as it does have to be conducted in a manner that is conducive to young people's wishes and feelings to ensures full participation and for some young people their preferred choice is a virtual meeting. This decision is made on an individual basis with the expectation that the IRO has sought to see the young person outside of the review process.
- 5.12. IROs are endeavouring to increase their contact directly with children, whilst it is positive that in the main, it appears to be that IROs are achieving this there is still a significant amount of 'not recorded' which is disappointing. To gain a much better understanding of the contact that is conducted by IRO's a request has been made to make the reporting of this information mandatory from here on within the All About Me forms. There are occasions where an IRO has not been able to have direct contact with a young person, generally when they have refused to meet them. On these occasions the IRO will concentrate on trying to build further their relationship with the young person to ensure they are confident to meet with them for the next All About Me Review meeting. This is supported by establishing contact with the young person as soon as they have been allocated as we now send each young person a photo and contact details of the IRO they are allocated. The IRO now sends letters to the child following their All About Me reviews that encourages contact to be made and attendance at review meetings. The service also sends vouchers to young people in recognition of an achievement made by a young person that has been identified by their IRO. The team will have access to a care experienced apprentice, who will support us further with establishing clearer communication expected of the IRO between review meetings that is led by the needs of the young people.
- 5.13. In the last year there has been a real drive to encourage IRO's to record on children's case notes, it is positive that there has been an increase of this not only when an IRO has had contact with a young person outside of the review process but also to communicate any escalations and to report on contacts with Social Workers and outside agencies.

## 6. Timeliness of Initial Child Protection Reviews for Children subject to CP Plans.

% of children whose initial child protection conferences were held within 15 working days of the initiation of the s.47 enquiries which led to the conference

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23*
Warwickshire	83.1%	67.8%	69.6%	65.1%	79.9%
Statistical Neighbours	84.5%	82.4%	85.5%	82.0%	TBC
England	78.7%	77.7%	83.0%	79.2%	TBC

\*Data for 2022/23 is provisional as it has not yet been quality assured as part of our statutory returns process to the government.

- 6.1 There has been an increase of ICPC's being held within timescales between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, which is positive however, we remain below our expected target. This is an area that the service continues to focus upon as the local authorities' overall performance consistently remains below that of our regional neighbours although we have vastly improved from the previous 4 years. It is recognised that the data performance dropped due to a change in the way in which Children's Services manage their S47 enquires as they no longer extend their preceding processes to meet the 15-day timescales and our reporting is more accurate than previously.
- 6.2. The timeliness of Initial Child Protection conferences (ICPC) continues to be an area that the service monitors closely alongside Service Managers. The team has been able to report to the operations teams the causes for delay in the timeliness of ICPCs. These include availability of parents, Social Workers, availability of other agency professionals. We are also aware that there is a need for Team Managers to be more robust in their scrutiny of the timeliness of S47 Assessments being completed by their social workers. Other delays are because of ICPCs being abandoned on the day of conference due to the social work team being improperly prepared with families not being given appropriate time to access their reports. The service continues to work closely with Service Managers who are monitoring and supporting Children's Teams to improve their practice regarding monitoring the timeliness of S47 assessments and ensuring reports are shared with families 3 days before the Conference. There is an expectation that chairs are to consult both the Operations Manager and IRO Duty worker prior to abandoning ICPC to ensure there is a clear rationale for having to do so.
- 6.3 The service has a robust duty system enables us to support teams to reflect upon their threshold and to determine whether all areas of working have been explored prior to considering proceeding to child protection conference. This system also provides learning for social workers and managers as well as offer positive alternatives for managing good safeguarding. This supports the principle of Restorative Practice, working alongside and enabling families. Ideally the process should also assist in developing Smart Plans and we are seeking for the return of Action Plans within the Section 47/ICPC process for scrutiny. A recent audit completed by Service Manager

identified that more challenges could have been made and a clear message has been given to teams to seriously consider any challenges made by IRO duty and accept it as a time to reflect upon decision making, since this has occurred, the service has experienced a more positive response and team reflecting upon their decision making.

#### 6.4. Timeliness of Review Child Protection for Children subject to Cp Plans.

Timeliness of Reviews: Of children on a child protection plan for at least 3 months at 31<sup>st</sup> March, the proportion whose reviews were held within statutory timescales (initially 3 months, then every 6 months).

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23*
Warwickshire	78.0%	76.2%	86.1%	79.9%	90.9%
Statistical Neighbours	93.0%	92.0%	93.6%	86.4%	TBC
England	91.8%	91.5%	93.2%	89.3%	TBC

\*Data for 2022/23 is provisional as it has not yet been quality assured as part of our statutory returns process to the government.

6.5. It is positive that the service has managed to increase the timeliness of Review Child Protection Conference (RCPC) to the highest it has been in 5 years. The contributing factor has been due to us holding reviews 4 weeks early where appropriate to do so; as well as a closer scrutiny by Operations Managers for those that are going out of timescale alongside evidence of their decision making on the child’s file. The Chair of conference will also now monitor by means of midway review discussions with Social Workers/Team Leaders enabling Chairs to provide greater scrutiny.

#### 6.6. Children subject to child protection for 21 months and those subject to a third child protection plan.

Number of:	March 2019	March 2020	March 2021	March 2022	March 2023
Children subject to a plan for 21 months	6	8	17	6	11
Children with a third CP plan.	19	9	17	33	15

6.7. The team actively supports the application of consistent thresholds for child protection conferences and robust escalation processes. These processes focus on ensuring progress on any child protection repeat plans and those plans that have been in place for over nine months.

6.8. At 18 months onward, where a Child Protection Plan continues, they are proactively monitored by the Child Protection Escalation Panel that meets on a six-weekly basis to ensure plans are not drifting. This is chaired by the Principal Social Worker, attended by a Service Manager/Operations Manager from the Safeguarding and Support Service, and the Operations Managers for the IRO Service.

- 6.9. Of the 11 children subject to a child protection plan for 21 months they consist of 5 families of which 1 family is no longer subject to child protection plan, 3 families child protection plans will step down to child in need at next review child protection conference and 1 family is in the PLO process there has been positive progress that continues to be monitored.
- 6.10. It is positive that there has been a decrease of children subject to third child protection plans following the significant increase experienced last year. Of the 15 children they consist of 9 families, of which 3 of the families have had their child protection plan ended. 1 family remains subject to a child protection plan as the young person refused to remain in foster care, 1 is in the PLO process and progressing well, 2 families are in the process of going to PLO. 1 family is due to step down to child in need at the next review child protection conference. 1 family has recently become subject to a child protection plan, they are progressing well and will continue to be supported and monitored through the process.
- 6.11. The Midway Review process is supporting the process of scrutiny and enables matters to be raised prior to review meetings or bring forward conferences if progress has been made.

## **7 Quality Assurance Processes**

- 7.1. One of the key functions of the IRO role is to identify any issues that are compromising the child's rights to have permanent care arrangements identified and achieved in a timely way. The IRO must act if blocks to effective planning emerge.
- 7.2. The statutory guidance is clear that all authorities should have established mechanisms for informal and formal escalation of concerns and dispute resolution processes to ensure that any concerns about care plans are identified and resolved in a timely way. These processes should also enable the service to evidence its impact on improved outcomes for looked after children and young people and identify any themes or issues impacting on the overall quality of services to children in care.
- 7.3. Warwickshire has a well-established system that enables a systematic approach to tracking the progress of individual care plans and the identification of themes and issues emerging that impact on the quality-of-service provision for children in care. Our current procedure has been revised to ensure the emphasis remains on effective communication supporting timely resolutions. There is an accepted culture within Warwickshire of the responsibilities of the IRO and how we best work together to achieve good outcomes for children.
- 7.4. Following each statutory review, the IRO provides feedback on aspects of the review process. This includes a judgement on the progress of the care plan. These are:
- Red - delay seriously impacting on the plan
  - Amber - specific issue of concern in care planning but overall plan is progressing
  - Green- there are no concerns care plan is progressing well.

## 7.5 RAG Rating Judgment

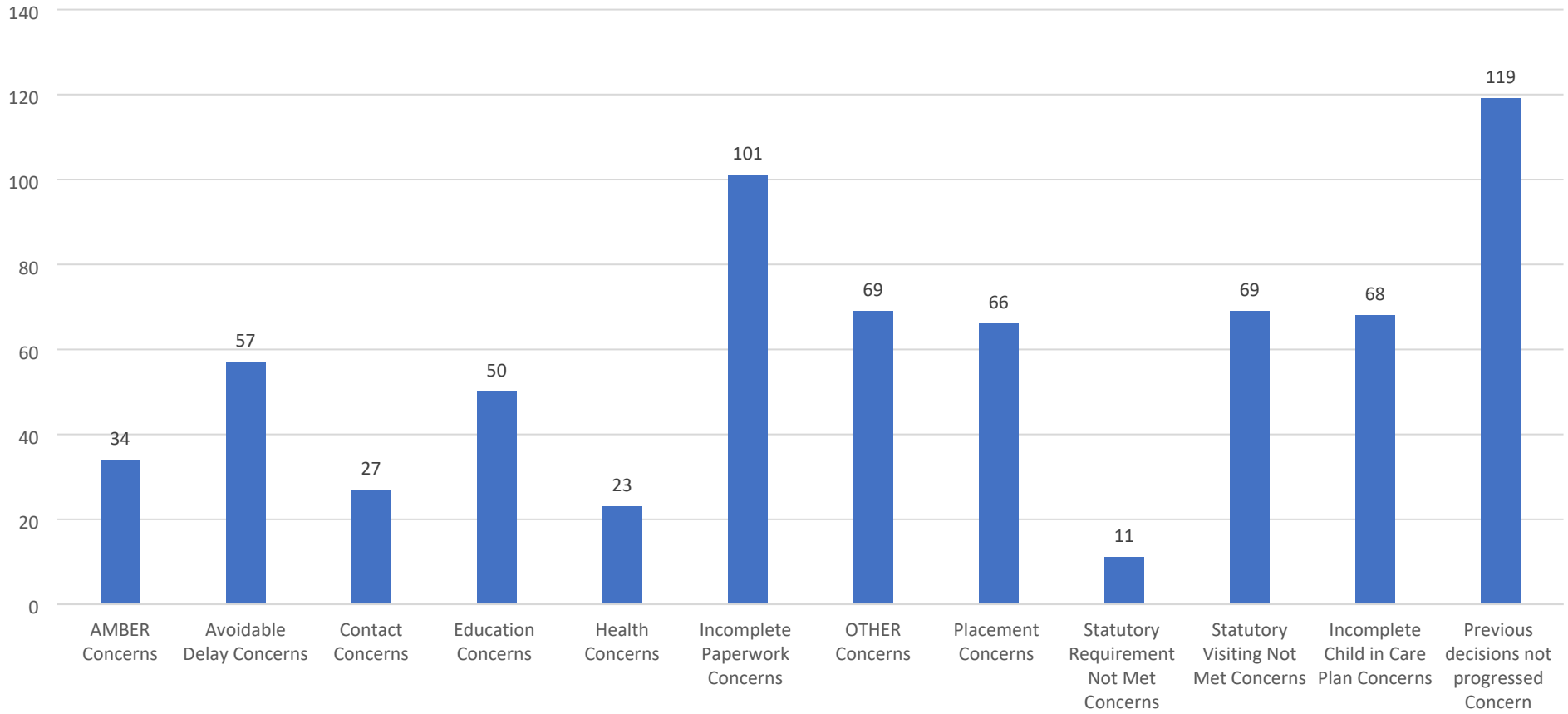
Total Number of All About Me Reviews completed per team with RAG rating

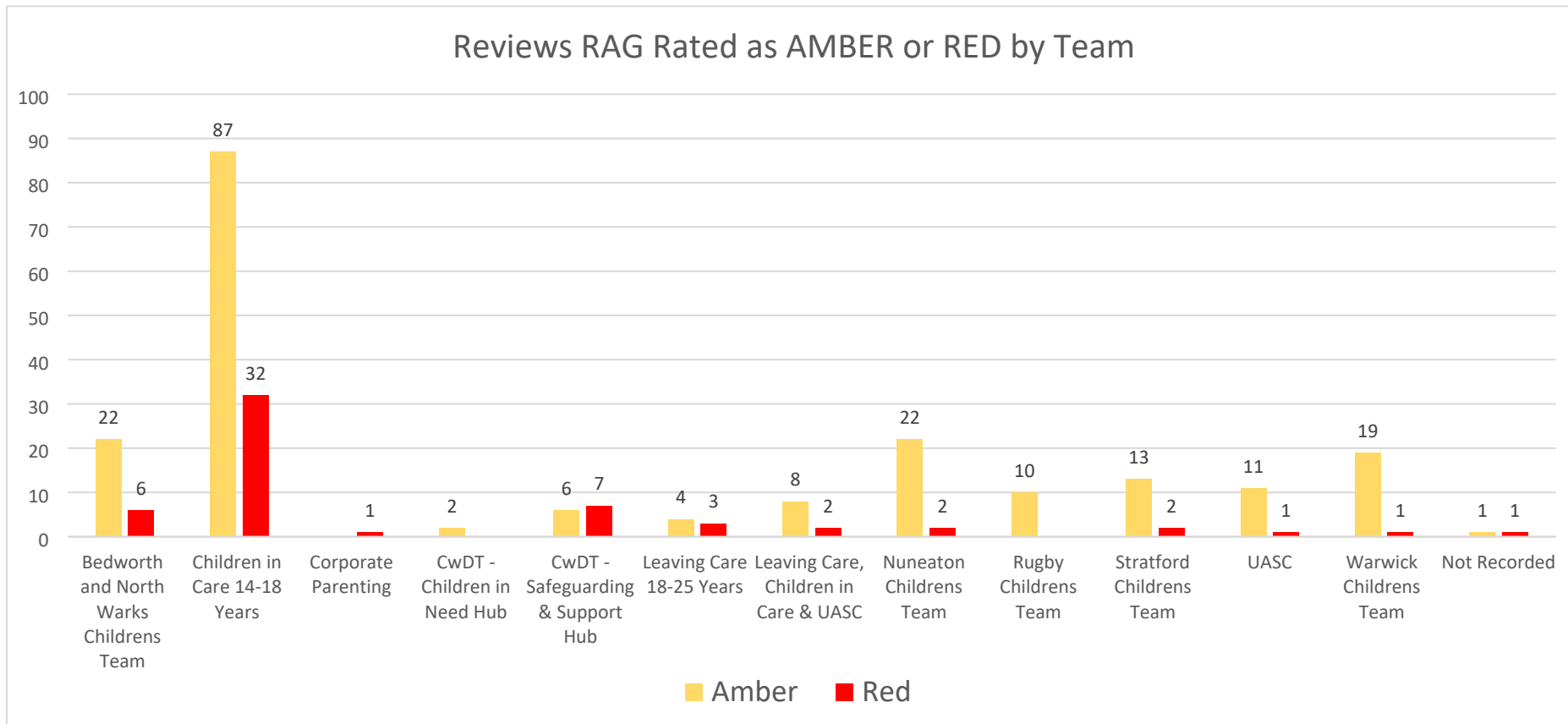
Team	Amber	Green	Red	Not Recorded	Grand Total
Bedworth and North Warks Childrens Team	22	159	6	2	189
Children in Care 14-18 Years	87	265	32	11	395
Children with Disabilities Team		2			2
Corporate Parenting		1	1		2
CwDT - Children in Need Hub	2	22		2	26
CwDT - Safeguarding & Support Hub	6	68	7	1	82
Disability Transitions Team		3			3
EHTS Social Workers		1		1	2
Family & Adolescent Support Team North		1			1
Family & Adolescent Support Team South		1			1
Initial Response East 2		1			1
Initial Response South 2		3			3
Innovate Team		2			2
Leaving Care 18-25 Years	4	16	3		23
Leaving Care, Children in Care & UASC	8	23	2	1	34
Nuneaton Childrens Team	22	190	2	6	220
Rugby Childrens Team	10	149		5	164
Stratford Childrens Team	13	171	2		186
UASC	11	217	1	3	232
Warwick Childrens Team	19	135	1	3	158
Youth Justice Service		5			5
Not Recorded	1	11	1		13
<b>Total</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>1446</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>1744</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>11.8%</b>	<b>82.9%</b>	<b>3.3%</b>	<b>2.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

1744 reviews were completed using the new All About Me: Chair Monitoring Information and the above table shows the number and % of reviews by how they were RAG rated by the chair of the review.



### Breakdown of Countywide Concerns





The Children in Care 14-18 team had the highest number of reviews rated as AMBER/RED although this team also have the largest volume of CIC allocated to them.

## 7.6. Details of Concerns Raised during review

### Breakdown of Concerns by Team

Team	AMBER Concerns	Avoidable Delay Concerns	Contact Concerns	Education Concerns	Health Concerns	Incomplete Paperwork Concerns	OTHER Concerns	Placement Concerns	Statutory Requirement Not Met Concerns	Statutory Visiting Not Met Concerns	Incomplete Child in Care Plan Concerns	Previous decisions not progressed Concern	Total
Bedworth and North Warks Childrens Team	3	2	7	10	5	15	7	9	1	6	5	14	189
Children in Care 14-18 Years	19	21	8	25	7	35	26	17	4	33	27	52	395
Children with Disabilities Team						1							2
Corporate Parenting	1	1				1						1	2
CwDT - Children in Need Hub						2				1	2		26
CwDT - Safeguarding & Support Hub		1		2	2	1	4	3		1	2	4	82
Disability Transitions Team													3
EHTS Social Workers										1		1	2
Family & Adolescent Support Team North													1
Family & Adolescent Support Team South													1
Initial Response East 2													1
Initial Response South 2													3
Innovate Team													2
Leaving Care 18-25 Years	3	1		1	2	5	3	4		3	3	4	23
Leaving Care, Children in Care & UASC	3	3			1	4	3	3	1	5	4	7	34
Nuneaton Childrens Team		13	8	5	1	11	9	9		6	3	13	220
Rugby Childrens Team		4	3	3	2	4	3	2		2	4	6	164
Stratford Childrens Team	2	5	1	2	1	12	4	5	5	10	10	4	186
UASC				1	2	6	5	5			4	9	232
Warwick Childrens Team	3	6		1		4	5	9		1	4	4	158
Youth Justice Service													5
Not Recorded													13
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>1744</b>

A total of 694 concerns were noted on All About Me reviews carried out during 2022/23. The most frequent concerns were:

- Previous Decisions Not Progressed - 17.1% (119 cases)
- Incomplete Paperwork – 14.5% (101 cases)
- Statutory Visiting Not Met Concerns – 9.9% (69 cases)

Of the 694 concerns raised:

- 465 were RAG rated as RED/AMBER
- 227 were RAG rated as GREEN
- 2 were not RAG rated

## 7.7. Actions following AMBER & RED Referrals

Team	Increase Reviewing frequency	Referral to Operations Manager	Referral to Service Manager	NONE
Bedworth and North Warks Childrens Team		11	7	1
Children in Care 14-18 Years	30	53	21	14
Corporate Parenting			1	
CwDT - Children in Need Hub		2		
CwDT - Safeguarding & Support Hub	3	5	4	
Leaving Care 18-25 Years	1	3	3	1
Leaving Care, Children in Care & UASC	1	3	2	
Nuneaton Childrens Team	9	17	2	1
Rugby Childrens Team	2	8		
Stratford Childrens Team		7		
UASC		4	1	3
Warwick Childrens Team	3	6	1	3
Not Recorded		1	1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>23</b>

**Data Caveat:** Some cases RAG rated as AMBER/RED have been recorded as having more than one

7.8 The system is relatively simple but does evidence that the Independent Reviewing Officers are systematically raising issues of concern through the escalation process and that managers are responding appropriately and ensuring resolutions are reached. The figures show a continual picture that most plans are considered to be progressing well, but where concerns are raised, active steps are taken to address areas of concern or delay.

- 7.9 The data can be broken down into teams /services to inform overall planning issues and identify any current issues impacting on specific services. As a service we have strengthened our footprint especially within the child's file and have established tracking systems that enables a more robust overview by the IROs regarding our escalations and challenges to ensure reasonable resolutions are sought. Responses have generally been positive and there is an accepted culture that strong oversight and escalations are expected and required of the service to effectively support planning.
- 7.10 The data does evidence improvements in some areas and decline in others by having the data it allows for more focused consideration of service improvement or development issues. It is concerning that there has been an increase from last year in delays in the progression of previous decisions which has been due to the staffing crisis/retention experienced by the local authority within different teams at different times since the pandemic. This has also had an impact on the completion of paperwork for our All About Me reviews which is the second highest Rag ambers sent. This in turn impacts on timeliness of reviews although there have been some improvements from last year. It is concerning that rag ratings have increased for statutory visits not being met and whilst "Other" is equal to this but slightly improved from last year.

*The categories of "Other" which includes areas such as, quality of Care Plans produced, Social Work practice, lack of planning, no allocated social worker, safeguarding concerns/risk to child. This demonstrates the complexities of issues that must be managed by Children's Teams and IROs alike.*

- 7.11 The current escalation and communication protocols recognise the importance of an effective multi agency response to care planning processes. Where the block to planning arises from a lack of service provision from partner agency the IRO must now ensure that the issue is raised within that agency. This includes referring issues of concern directly to the Commissioning services. The services continue to look at systems that will allow IROs to directly alert partner agencies and corporate parenting bodies when their service is having a negative impact upon the progress of Child's Care Plan.
- 7.12. In addition to raising issues of concern within care planning processes the IRO's regularly send emails celebrating good practice. In the main these acknowledge the impact of the positive relationships established by social workers with young people and their families.
- 7.13 In addition to Child Protection Escalation Panel processes, the IRO service is represented on key meetings that support decision making and effective oversight of the progression of plans for Children in Care. This is Children's Decision Meetings (CDM) and Through Care panels as well as Step down Residential Panel. As well as attending the Warwickshire Strategic Health of Children in Care & Care Leavers Group. Our service also gave a workshop at the recent Foster Carers Conference and are hopeful to do this again in the near future.

## 8. IRO Learning, Audits & Children's Services Learning Reviews

8.1. As part of the 22/2023 internal audit plan an independent audit of the IRO service was completed by Elfreda Walker in April 2023, which concluded that overall, there are good controls in place, that are functioning effectively in respect of the agreed scope of the audit. Elfreda found that it was clear that the IRO's care about the children they represent, and they effectively advocate on their behalf to ensure that their needs are being met. Three areas of improvement were recommended:

- 1) An Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is not always allocated within five days of the child becoming looked after by the authority.

***The service has increased the notification requests and allocation to twice per week.***

- 2) Timely reviews of children in care (CiC) care plans are not always carried out in accordance with guidance.

***The service held an IRO workshop following identifying the causes of late reviews and will monitor the data for this on a quarterly basis as well as drawing any themes to the Service Managers attention immediately.***

- 3) Children in Care do not always receive a letter from their IRO setting out what had been agreed at the 'All About Me' review. Where letters had been produced, they did not always include timescales for completing the actions.

***This above finding was explored and discussed in team meeting in May 2023 and there was a consensus that it is not always appropriate to send letters. IRO's are to make it clear within minutes as and when this decision is made and explain reasons why.***

8.2. The service has introduced its own peer and managers audit tool to assist with improving its own practice, this should enable issues such as those above to be easily picked up. This will also inform Principal IROs of any concerning themes occurring that may require addressing as well as improve the individual practice of IRO's and offer more consistency around the role.

8.3 Monthly learning sets held with the Family Group Conference Service and LADO (Local Authority designated officer) have a dual purpose; they assist with the growth of IROs as a service provider and ensures that IRO's practice remains current and informed by research outcomes as well as supporting our focus on quality assurance, identifying areas of practice of a concern and seeking solution to support the local authority to improve its outcomes for our young people. There is also an expectation that IRO's will disseminate what they have learnt to social workers and other professionals within All About Me Review meetings and consultations.

8.4 The service has established close links with the Children's Safeguarding & Learning Manager, contributing to case learning reviews and maintaining a tracker so IROs can successfully disseminate their learning through good practice. This has also enabled IRO's to be more proactive with their scrutiny in escalating any matters that are of significant safeguarding concern for independent review by the Safeguarding & Learning manager.

## 9. Children and Families Court Advisory Service

- 9.1. There are two distinct areas in which the IRO is expected to work in conjunction with CAFCASS:
- As part of family proceedings when the child is in the care of the Local Authority (Looked After).
  - When an IRO makes a referral to CAFCASS as part of the formal escalation process.
- 9.2 The Public Law Outline (PLO) refers to 'the timetable for the child'. The guidance states that the IRO should feel confident that they are kept fully informed of the progress of the child's case, during and at the conclusion of proceedings. This will involve:
- Close liaison with the Children's Guardian throughout and at the conclusion of proceedings
  - The legal department for the Local Authority ensuring the IRO is provided with all relevant court documentation and where appropriate access independent legal advice.
- 9.3. In order to achieve these outcomes a joint protocol has been agreed between Warwickshire and Coventry IRO services and both legal departments to ensure consistency of approach within the local family court system. Annual training events between the IROs and CAFCASS occur to sustain positive working relationships.
- 9.4. The statutory guidance requires local authorities to ensure that IRO's have access to independent legal advice. A strong system is in place within Warwickshire that has contributed to the development of the service and also supports effective resolution of any disputes arising on individual cases.
- 9.5. The protocol has proven to be very effective in the management of issues or disputes arising within court proceedings and has been acknowledged nationally as an example of effective practice. Guardians and IROs continue to work effectively together during and after proceedings. The joint training sessions promote effective working relations between Guardians and IRO'S and enables us to respond to any emerging themes or issues.
- 9.6. The IRO service has been represented on the Family Justice Board Performance Subcommittee as a means of improving and promoting the role of the IRO within court proceedings. Our Local Family court judge has been supportive of the service and keen to ensure that IRO's are able to meet their responsibilities to children in care. The service has developed systems to ensure good communication between relevant parties and the IRO view is accurately represented within proceedings. Meetings are now focused on specific court cases that may be at risk of drift, but all relevant information is shared with the IRO service to support effective oversight and intervention if required.
- 9.7. Promoting effective relationships between CAFCASS and IRO services is a key area of current work in the Region and our systems have provided a good model that other services are drawing on.

## 10. Summary of achievements, challenges and goals for 2022/2023

<b>Summary of the work of the Independent Reviewing Service.</b>	
<p>What have been our key achievements in 2022-23?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Successful recruitment campaigns leading to a fully staffed service by November 2022, including strengthening up our management structure within the service.</li> <li>➤ Successfully secured a care experienced young person as an apprentice within the IRO service for 6 months. The team is eager to have access to another care experienced apprentice to further enable the IROs to strengthen the child's voice within the review process and ensure the way in which they communicate directly to children and young people remains current. This will also enable IROs to strengthen their practice so they can actively implement the learning from reviews and OFSTED whilst remaining child focused.</li> <li>➤ Improvement in the service performance culture through utilising information management reports which drive conversations around timeliness and sharing good practice further reinforced within the learning sets. IRO's contributed to auditing to inform practice and report upon local authorities' performance.</li> <li>➤ The continuation of implementing Restorative Practice approach to Child Protection Conferences and All About Me Reviews to enhance participation, multiagency planning with families and effective decision making. This incorporates high levels of challenge to ensure that the child's plan is effective, particularly when children are on long or repeat child protection plans or when there are delays in achieving permanency.</li> <li>➤ Enhancing the IRO's/Chairs footprint within a young person's file records and more actively seeking response and resolution to escalations made. Ensuring that senior managers have a continued oversight of the areas of concerns or whether themes of concerns arise.</li> <li>➤ The introduction and active use of Midway Reviews between Child Protection Conference to support the progression of planning placing the focus on the reduction of Children subject to Child Protection Plans.</li> <li>➤ Focus upon permanency planning for our children in care to support the reduction of children in care.</li> <li>➤ Independent audit indicated that the service has good systems in place to support the service delivery.</li> <li>➤ The service has strengthened its learning culture to ensure IROs are influential in supporting good social work practice, disseminating any learning from research, audits and safeguarding reviews.</li> <li>➤ There has been a continued focus on practice improvement based upon data within the IRO service which has enhanced the ability for IROs to support the improvement or maintaining of good standards within teams.</li> </ul>



<p><b>What have been the challenges in 2022-23?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Changes to business support processes have necessitated change and adaption to new systems.</li> <li>➤ Progressing out of Covid-19 restrictions to return to the good working practice arrangements that were in place pre covid ie face to face meetings.</li> <li>➤ Ensuring technology remains a viable alternative option at all times to successfully conducting meetings.</li> <li>➤ Staffing changes, long term sickness and capacity issues over the year has meant considerable challenges to workload management systems. Especially the impact of recruiting and retention upon our own staff and those within other teams.</li> <li>➤ Changes and turnover of staff within Operational teams can impact on consistency of Care Planning and Reviewing and, with addressing issues raised regarding timeliness of convening Child Protection Conference.</li> <li>➤ Establishing a better understanding of the presenting data to our performance indicators to improve overall practice</li> </ul>
<p><b>What are our priority goals for 2022- 2023?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ To continue to embed Restorative practice to both child protection processes and All About Me Reviews. Particularly working with children and young people to be central in their planning. This requires improved participation in their reviews, data capture and corresponding strategic developments.</li> <li>➤ Maintain appropriate challenge to poor or ineffective practices that impact negatively on the progress of children's Care Plans.</li> <li>➤ To continue to develop the service performance culture, particularly improving timeliness of convening Child Protection Conferences and All About Me Reviews as well as the participation of young people within their reviews and Child Protection Conferences.</li> <li>➤ The implementation of enhancing the IRO learning from learning sets to improve their practice further alongside using audit tools and data to improve the delivery of the IRO service. The service will continue to be committed to disseminate the IRO learning to support the improvement of social work practice.</li> <li>➤ Support the expansion of the use of Family Group Conference, MACE and Domestic Abuse service including Caring Dads programme to assist with reducing the numbers of children coming to Child Protection Conference and made subject to child protection plans.</li> <li>➤ To proactively review permanency and stability of placements to ensure children in care maintain links to their family (wherever appropriate) and have the greatest stability available to them and support the reduction of children in care.</li> </ul>

## 11. Conclusions

- 11.1. The service can report overall good performance in key areas of practice and a number of significant service developments have been achieved within a period of continuing high workloads. Effective relationships have been maintained with key partners and the service continues to evidence strong quality assurance systems within care planning processes. The service has maintained its priority to work closely with the Children In Care Council and will continue to maintain a focus on this in the forthcoming year. The service believes that the working approach reflects the principles of Restorative Practice in that IROs have worked with the range of professionals and partner agencies with corporate parenting responsibilities towards children in care and provided high support and effective challenge within care planning processes. The service has identified clear areas for service development and further improvements and feel confident that it can achieve these goals.
- 11.2 Most of last year has been about reinstating the IRO services infrastructure and that of the Local Authority back inline to where it was prior to the pandemic. Since August 2022, the Local Authority has invested well in the IRO service. This has enabled the service to strengthen the management within the team alongside adding to the number of IRO's, allowing IRO's to concentrate not only on improving its quality assurance role but also its own general practice. IRO's are now holding reasonable caseloads; any IRO sickness has not spiralled the team into crises management and, the reduced caseload has further supported IRO's to extend their role to enable them to meet their statutory requirements. This overall, aids achieving better outcomes for children and young people and their families.

### Enquiries:

Julie Smith– Operational Manager.  
 Independent Reviewing Service  
 Quality Assurance and Service Development  
 Children and Families Business Unit.  
 Extn: 3010  
[juliesmith@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:juliesmith@warwickshire.gov.uk)

Role	Name	Contact Information
Operations Manager	Julie Smith	juliesmith@warwickshire.gov.uk
Service Manager	Dan Atkins	danielatkins@warwickshire.gov.uk
Assistant Director	John Coleman	johncoleman@warwickshire.gov.uk
Strategic Director	Nigel Minns	nigelminns@warwickshire.gov.uk
Portfolio Holder	Councillor Sue Markham	suemarkham@warwickshire.gov.uk

The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

- Children and Families Senior Leadership Team on 27/06/2023.
- Other members: None.