

Independent Reviewing Officers

Children Looked After

Annual Report 2023-2024



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Executive Summary

We are pleased to present this year's Annual Independent Reviewing Officer Report for Children Looked After by Lancashire. In this year's report we have continued to use an accessible and visually appealing format, following the positive feedback from last year's report.

2023-24 has been another busy year, as we build on the strengths that led to our recognition as a Good Local Authority in the previous year, and strive for excellence in our services to, and outcomes for, our children looked after. Our focus on strengths based and relational practice continues to be drawn from our overarching Family Safeguarding model but is further reflected in the wider national reform agenda under Stable Homes, Built on Love, and the Children's Social Care National Framework. For us an IRO Service this means – building and sustaining supportive relationships with the children we work with, ensuring that children's voices and best interests are heard and reflected throughout care planning and review practice, supporting and assuring the drive to physical, legal and emotional permanence in loving homes that prepare young people for independence, and continuous learning and improvement through quality assurance and audit activity.

Looking back over the year this has meant that we have been able to –

- Ensure that children looked after receive timely reviews which are child centred in their delivery and focused on achieving permanence at the earliest possible point.
- Increase the number of children who directly participate in their CLA Reviews, and promote / extend the use of tools and services that promote children's participation such as use of advocacy and the Mind of My Own app.
- Review and quality assure the care provided by our in-house cohort of over 500 foster carers, with an increasing focus on the input and experiences of the children they look after.
- Support children receiving the right support at the right level, including through permanency planning for children to live with their family outside of the looked after system. IRO oversight of Supervision Orders provides reassurance to family courts and CAFCASS Officers that support will be in place to meet the ongoing needs of children.

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- Strengthening our footprint in monitoring and assuring the development of children's plans in between reviews and setting targets to extend this further.
- Working collaboratively and in a strengths based manner with social work teams, including the use of informal and formal outcomes resolutions to resolve any issues re a child's care plan.
- Promoting and assuring the progression of Life Story Work and Later Life Letters for our children looked after, as a key quality standard to support emotional permanence.
- Undertaking Learning Space Reviews and internal quality audits to promote learning and best practice within the service and the wider system.

Finally, we outline our priorities for 2023-24, which are based on the values and principles set out above. We want to go further to deliver a review process in which the language, structure, process and outcomes reflects the views and best interests of the children at the heart of their reviews. We want to build on our progress in delivering effective monitoring and IRO footprint. We also want to develop our practice to best serve the needs of young people as they approach the transition to adulthood, as well as the needs of those children who are looked after without parents or family in the UK.

Progress on Priorities 2023-24

We Said

To build on direct participation in CLA Reviews so that over 60% of children directly participate.

To ensure that 95% of Children Looked After have regular oversight of their plan and progress in between Reviews.

Focus on achieving permanence for children who are placed with a parent, or in foster care without a long term ratified lasting home.

Support the roll-out of updated disruption meetings process and learning.

IROs are to be continually supported to develop best practice through trauma informed development opportunities.

We Did

We exceeded our target and 63.9% of children and young people directly participated their CLA Review.

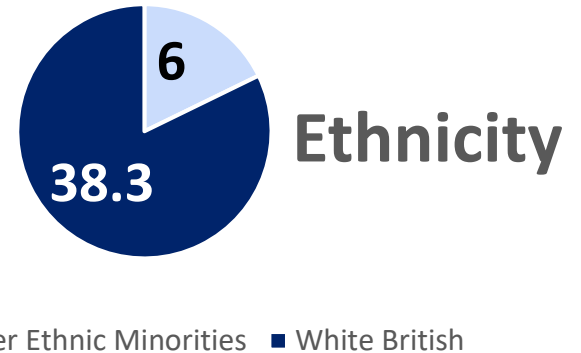
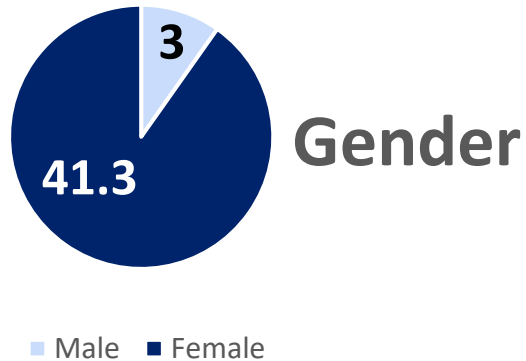
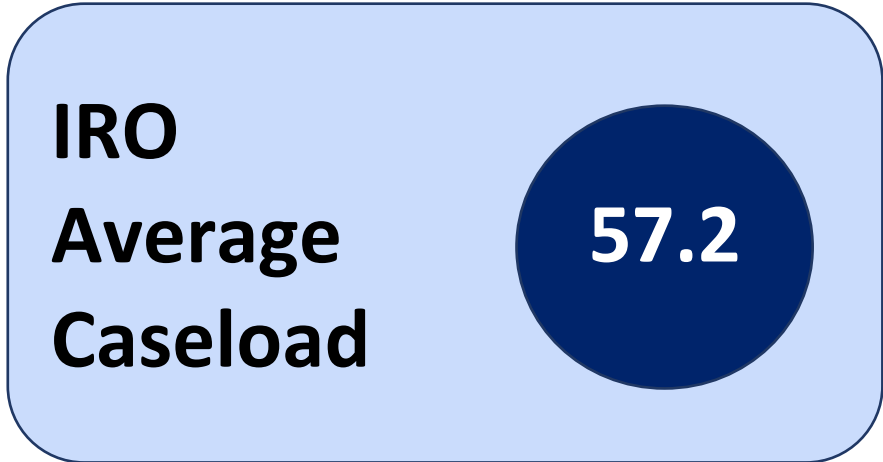
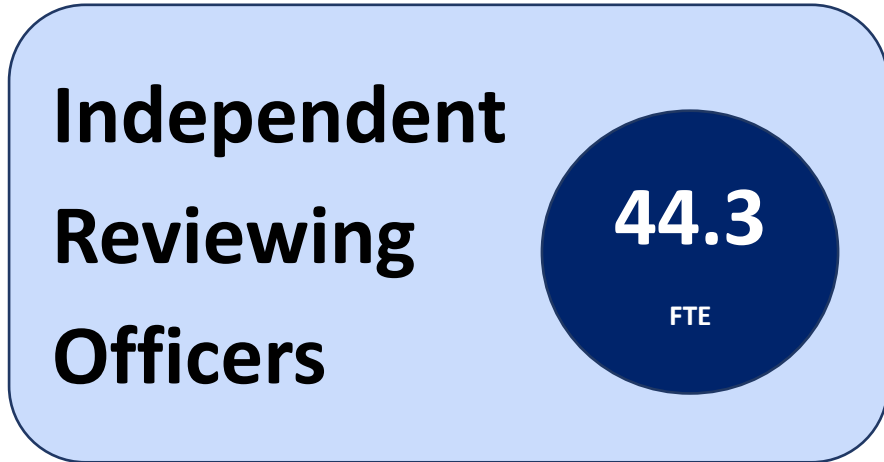
Rolling 12 month performance has increased significantly since last year, from 84% to over 93%. This is still just below our target of 95% and remains a priority for the service. .

Achieving permanence is considered at every CLA Review and formal challenge initiated where there are concerns in respect of drift/delay. Q&R managers continue to track this as part of monthly supervision with IROs.

We have contributed to the development of the revised Stability and Disruption Meeting process, which IRO's are now implementing.

Regular IRO briefs, training events and learning opportunities have taken place to support understanding and awareness of how trauma informed effects individuals and communities.

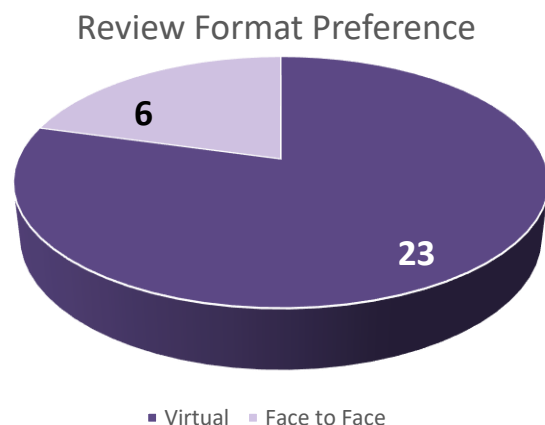
IRO Service



Fostering IRO

There are currently 564 foster carers, an increase of 21 from 2022/2023 annual report. We hold an average of 41 fostering reviews per month and up to 4 allegation reviews. The voice of the child is captured within each fostering review. This is often undertaken via the fostering support worker supporting the child to access Mind of My Own platform where they can share their wishes and feelings. 195 Mind of my own statements were recorded from 2023/24 via Support to Permanence across all teams. In addition to this young people can ask to be invited to the review for their foster carer.

Foster carers stated they continued to feel listened to, reviews were welcoming, and the overwhelming majority wanted fostering reviews to remain virtual. They felt virtual meetings were accessible, convenient, due to not needing to travel and overall positive. Following this feedback, we have decided that fostering reviews will continue as virtual meetings during 2024/25 and we will revisit this annually.

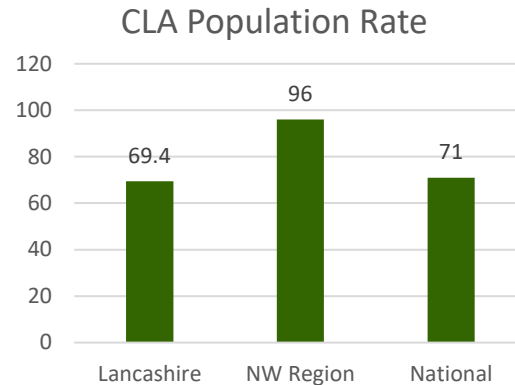


In February 2024 a snapshot questionnaire was completed following all fostering reviews that month, with overwhelmingly positive feedback. Out of 29 foster carers who completed the questionnaire only 6 preferred face to face reviews.

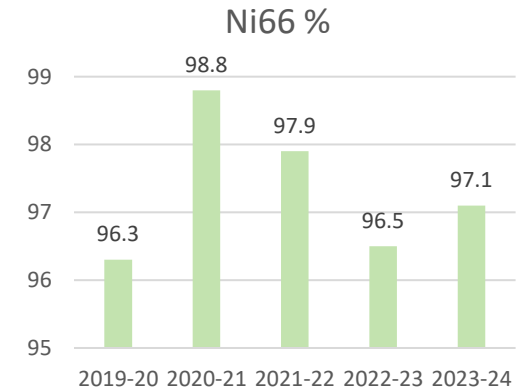


Children Looked After Performance

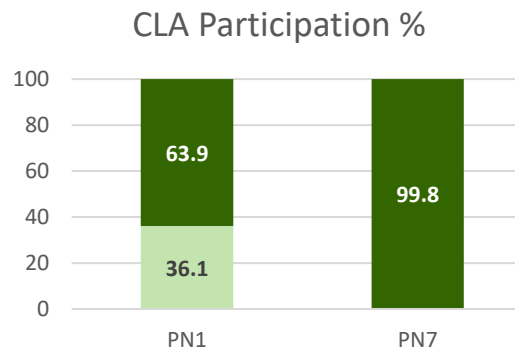
At the end of 2023-24 there were 1758 Children Looked After (CLA) in Lancashire (69.4 p/10k), a decrease of 118 children. This is lower than Regional (96) and National rates (71).



The percentage of CLA Reviews held in timescale during 2023-24 was 97.1%. This is an increase of 0.6% compared to 2022-23, which was 96.5%.



During 2023-24 99.8% of children and young people participated in their CLA Review process. 63.9% attended their review process, which is an increase of 11.5% from 2022-23, in line with our service priorities.



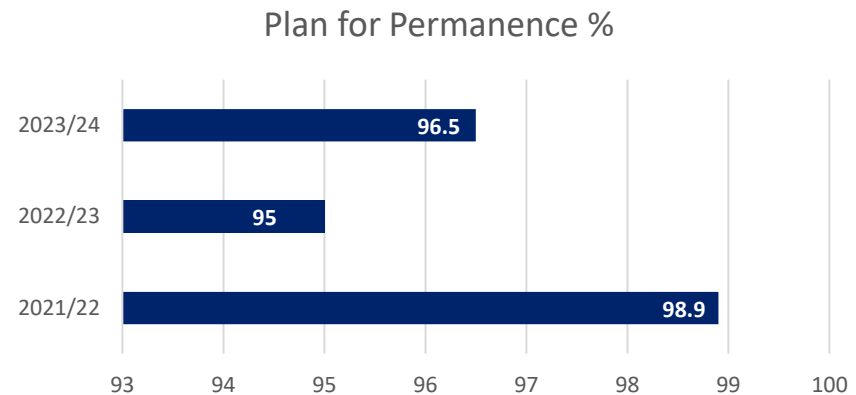
'Mind of My Own' is a web-based application that supports participation. During 2023-24 there were 1102 statements (up by 36%) created to share the views of children and young people, which is an increase of 339 since 2022-23. 195 were created by children from their own accounts and 907 were sent from workers accounts. 84 of statements were to prepare for a meeting, 21 were to sort a problem statement and 28 were to share good news. The IRO Service continues to work with the Participation Working Group to promote the use of Mind of My Own across Children's Services.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: A's attendance at his CLA reviews was minimal initially. Over the years he has attended his CLA reviews for a short period of time (popping in at the end). Over the past 12 months the IRO has encouraged him to chair his own reviews and he has chaired the last 2 reviews himself (the first one with support). A used prompt cards such as 'who is important to me' and 'where I live'. A chose the prompt cards and decided who he wanted to answer the question (including himself). A's voice is evident in his reviews and he has the opportunity to ask the things that are important to him.



Achieving Permanence

Planning for permanence continues to be a priority for IRO's, with the aim of ensuring Children Looked After have a plan for permanence by their second CLA review, and where this is not achieved, there are clear actions and timescales to achieve this. During 2023-2024, 96.5% of children were recorded as having a plan for permanence at the 2nd review. Excellent performance in this area evidences the continued focus on early permanence planning for children in our care.

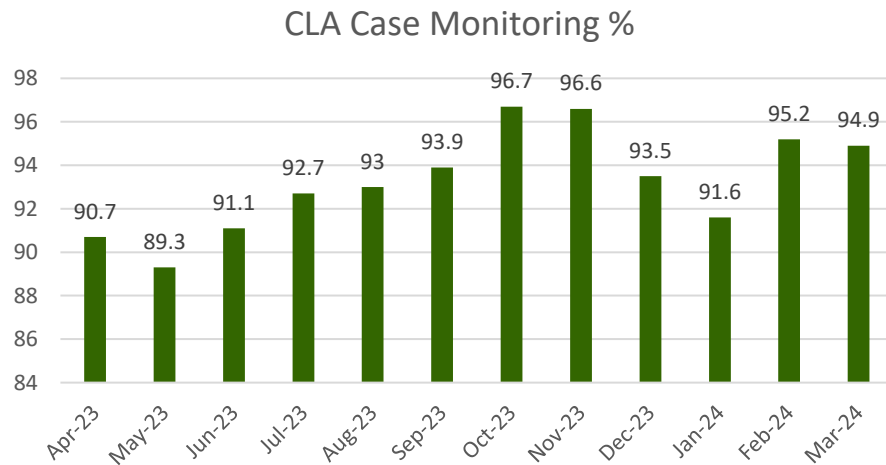


Permanence is achieved in line with Lancashire's Lasting Homes policy to ensure there is clarity and consistency in respect of permanence. The function of the Lasting Home Panel is to formalise and celebrate the designation of a child's home as their permanent and lasting home. The process of ratifying children's homes as permanent is separate to decision making around 'plans for permanence' and 'plans of permanence'.

IROs ensure permanence is considered and discussed in every review and appropriate review decisions are made. As part of progressing plans of permanence, IROs review plans for the discharge of care orders, in favour of reunification to birth families or Special Guardianship Orders. This is a vital part of securing legal permanence for children while using the least intervention necessary. IROs review whether the discharge of the Care Order is appropriate at every Child Looked After review and will endorse a plan where appropriate.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: S was subject to Care Proceedings, with consideration to a plan of adoption. Further assessment recommended that S should remain living with her birth family, with support via a Supervision Order. The IRO is providing formal oversight of the support arrangements within the Supervision Order at 3 monthly intervals. This input has ensured that S is supported to remain with her family, with the right support, and the minimal necessary statutory intervention (outside of Looked after at Home arrangements).

IRO Oversight

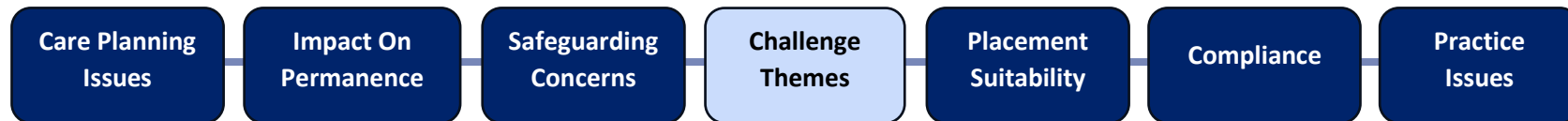
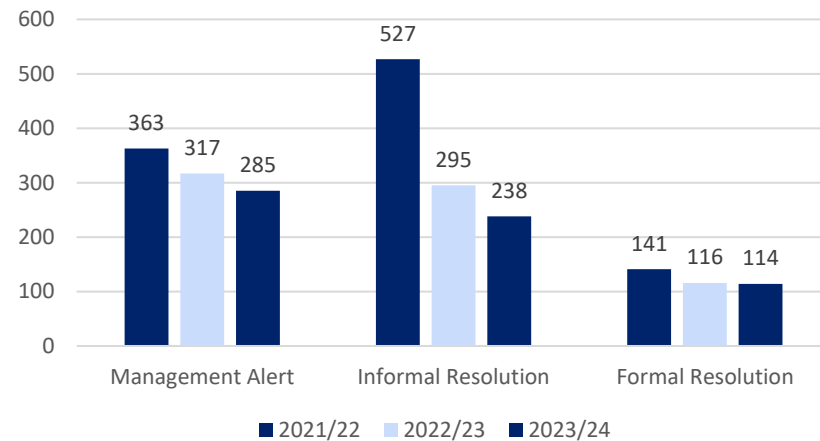


IROs are required to have regular oversight of the progression of a child's care plan, between reviews, to prevent drift and delay and promote positive outcomes for children and young people. IRO's complete this via CLA Monitoring Case note on the child's record. Rolling 12 month performance has increased significantly since last year, from 84% to over 93%, but this is still just below our target of 95% and therefore remains a priority through our refreshed performance monitoring arrangements.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: - IRO delivery of a child-centred CLA Review – K had prior experience of meetings before she became looked after. The IRO engaged with K to plan the first CLA Review with K at the centre, having knowledge, choice and control about the Review. K was able to participate in her Review fully and meaningfully, to ask questions, and to understand what was agreed. K's feedback from the Review was – ***"That was the best meeting I have ever had, it made me feel good and I was listened to"***.

IRO Challenge

Throughout 2023/24 the IRO service has continued to focus on the quality of IRO challenge in respect of outcomes for the child, ensuring challenge is evident, effective and outcome focussed. IROs use Management Alerts to raise compliance issues and the Informal or Outcome Resolution processes to track and escalate issues about the care plan for the child. IRO's continue to use formal challenge when no resolution can be reached informally; more frequently this has been in cases where there has been drift and delay with progressing plans of permanence or where this concern regarding placement suitability.



The rationale for the reduction in challenge is a continuous understanding within the directorate of quality of practice, alongside a commitment to an ongoing journey of improvement. Factors include the Family Safeguarding Model, with its strength-based, trauma informed and relational practice. Improvements in technology and digital solutions continue to support collaborative working and enable issues to be resolved at an earlier stage without the need for escalation. IRO's and Q&R Managers support practice through participation at a range of meetings alongside Children's Social Care, Complex Safeguarding, Leaving Care and SEND.

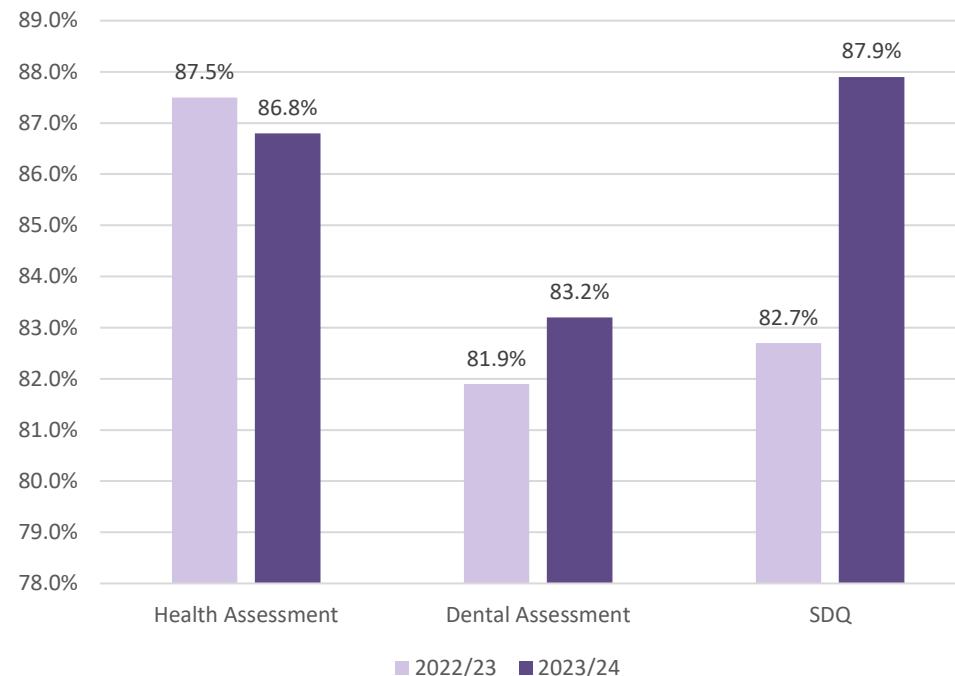
GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: - use of **Outcome Resolution** - G was looked after via Section 20 but mother was not engaging with Children's Social Care and his father was not informed fully of the concerns. The IRO recommended that legal advice be sought to ensure that permanency planning was achieved. The IRO continued to track the progress to ensure that the assessment of father was achieved without delay and this resulted in the child being able to be reunified with his father. This was initially supported via a Home Placement Agreement, but at the end of care proceedings this was able to be formalised through a Child Arrangement Order and Child in Need support. The intervention of the IRO was focused on achieving the best outcome for the child through collaborative working with the social work team.

Corporate Parenting

Health assessments / plans continue to be tracked through Children Looked After Reviews and IRO oversight. Performance is strong and stable. Children Looked After with an up-to-date health assessment at March 2024 86.8% compared to March 2023 87.5%.

Dental assessments are similarly tracked through IRO oversight and 12 month rolling performance increased across the year from 81.1% up to date to 88.1%. Children Looked After with an up-to-date dental assessment at March 2024 was 83.2% compared to March 2023 81.9%.

SDQ completion and elevated scores is monitored through our service dashboard to ensure completion, and attention to elevated scores. In March 2024 87.9% of 4–17-year-old children looked after had an up-to-date SDQ, 44.7% of the cohort have a 'score in the healthy range' (under 17) compared to 44.1% in March 2023.

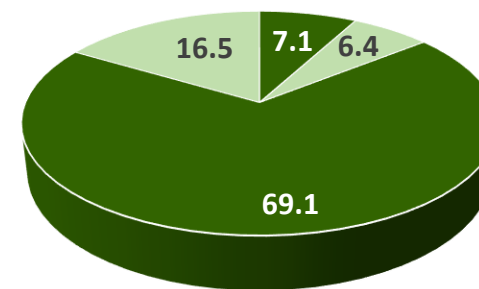


GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: - supporting participation and co-production - The IRO visited after the YP has recently moved home . The IRO asked the Young Person where she felt most comfortable talking and whether the Young Person would like an advocate for the upcoming Child Looked After review, and they completed the referral together. The IRO and Young Person also completed the Mind of My Own 'This Is Me' form together and this provided really important information about the Young Person that could be shared at the upcoming Child Looked After review. This preparation and consultation contributed to a successful review and co-produced plans.



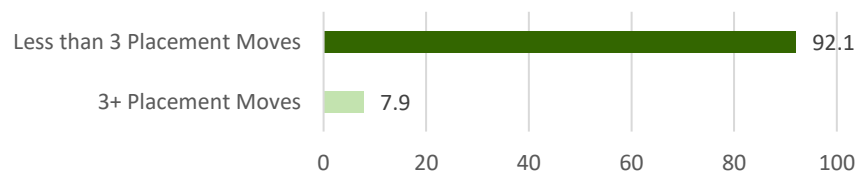
Of the 1,758 Children Looked After by Lancashire County Council: 69.1% are placed within an alternate family setting (1168 with foster carers, 47 with prospective adopters), which is a 0.1% increase from the previous year (March 2023: 69%). 16.5% (291 children) are placed within residential settings, (including Lancashire's residential children's homes, external residential settings, residential schools, secure units, hospitals and prisons). 6.4% (113 children) are placed in other community settings such as supported accommodation projects, supported tenancies, and supported lodgings. At the end of March 2024 there were 125 children placed with a parent, 38 via an Interim Care Order and 86 on a Full Care Order and 1 via Remand to the Local Authority; this represents 7.1% of all Children Looked After. This is an improved picture from the previous year when 10.4% of all Children Looked After were placed with their parents.

Placement Type %



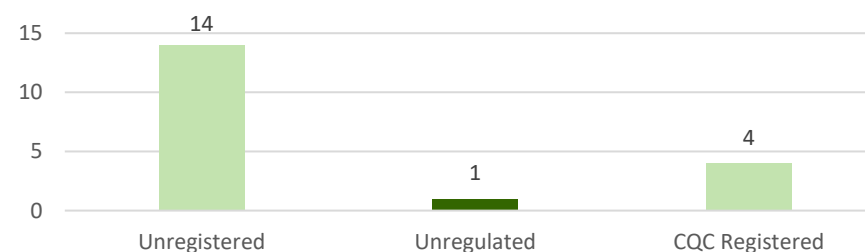
- Placed with Parents/People with PR
- Placed in Alternative Family Setting
- Placed in Residential Settings
- Placed in Community Settings

Placement Stability %



Children Looked After with more than 3 placement moves within 12 months increased slightly from 6.9% to 7.9%; this continues represent better performance compared to regional (9%) and national (10%) rates. The proportion of Children Looked After living in the same placement for over two years has increased slightly at 71.3% compared to 70.4% in 2022/23 and remains above regional and national comparators (69%).

IROs provide additional monitoring and scrutiny in relation to Unregistered and Unregulated placements. IROs visit the home following a child being placed there and maintain monthly contact and oversight in relation to placement suitability. In March 2024 there were 14 Unregistered placements, 1 Unregulated placement and 4 placements that are CQC registered only.



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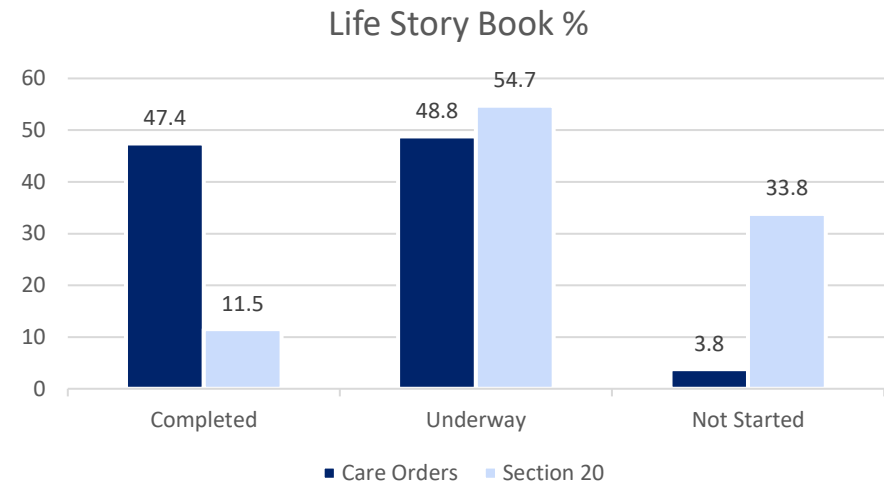
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Life Story Work forms an integral role in mapping out the life journey for a child. The Life Story Book is one strand of this work that should be started as soon as a child becomes Looked After. There is an important role for the IRO in ensuring this work is progressed continuously and considered as part of every Children Looked After Review.

The commencement, completion and updating of Life Story Books is overseen through the Review process, with overall performance reflected on our service dashboard. For some older children who have entered care at an older age and maintain strong links with their birth family their identity needs are met through a life story letter. Overall, this means that 93.4% of children within our Permanence Tracker are taking part in or have up to date Life Story Work compared to 92% last year.

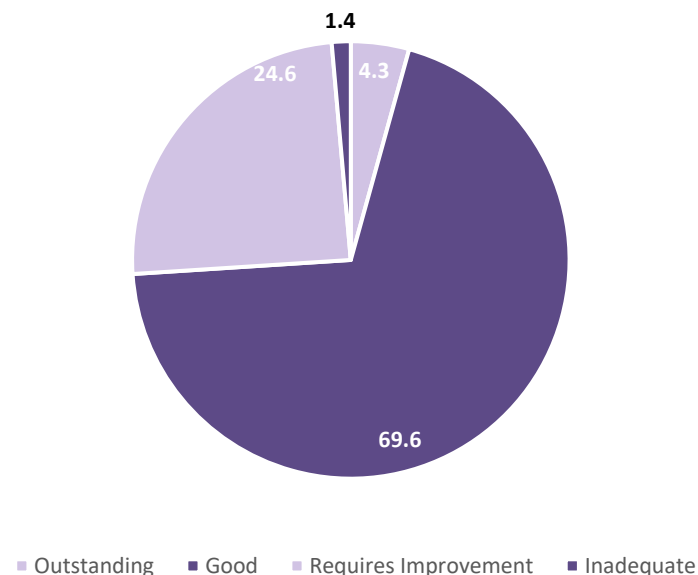
GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: Following review decisions and informal challenge, the Social Worker is now completing planned Life Story work with a six year old boy once a fortnight. Social worker has used genograms, drawings, colours and discussions and planned direct work to explore what children need and explain why he is not living with his parents. The child has been very involved in this work, shared what he wants to know and written to his mum. This piece of work has been responsive to his questions and needs and is supporting him to understand his history in a sensitive and child friendly way.



There has been a significant increase in the amount of Life Story Books not started for children subject to Section 20, this is primarily due to Life Story books not being appropriate for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and those children subject to Short Breaks, therefore these cohorts will no longer be considered in the data.

Every month thematic audits are completed and discussed with the IRO. From April 2023 – March 2024 138 audits were completed for CLA children - 38 for 0-5 year olds, 19 for 5-10 year olds, 21 for 11-15 year old and 39 for 16+. There were also 21 audits completed of CLA children held by Family Safeguarding that covered a range of ages. 6 (4.3%) were graded as Outstanding compared to 0.7% last year, 96 (69.6%) as Good compared to 49.3% last year, 34 (24.6%) as Requires Improvement compared to 47.8% last year and 2 (1.4%) as Inadequate compared to 2.2% last year. These judgements reflect the overall quality of care planning and support and are therefore in line with wider Tier 2 findings. Where improvements are identified these are agreed within the discussion.

Case Sample Audit Grading %

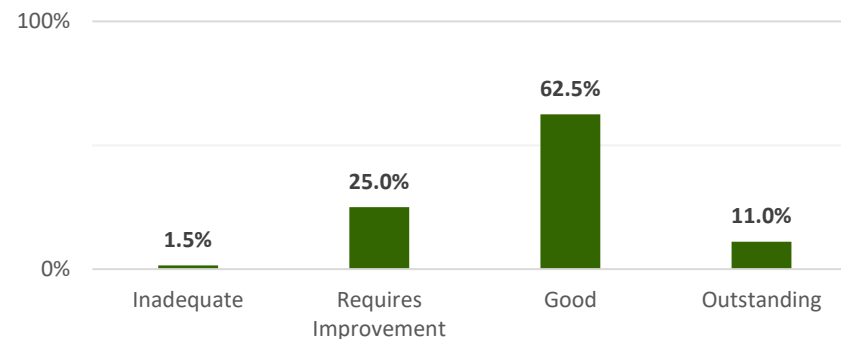


The supervision audits consistently show that:

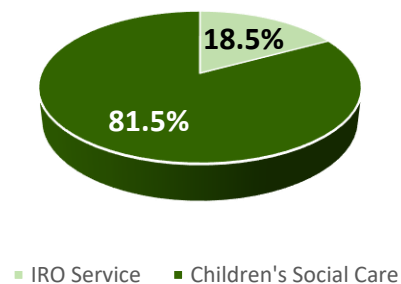
- Children are participating in their CLA reviews, and their voices are well recorded.
- CLA review decisions are SMART.
- CLA review outcomes are recorded in a child focussed manner.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: A compliment was received following the young person turning 18 and their final Child Looked After Review. *'Thank you so much for everything you have done for us over the years, you have gone above and beyond in your role as an IRO and you have kept this placement together in the hardest of times. For that we can't thank you enough. C has turned into a truly wonderful young man and I know he will miss you so much, in fact we all will! All our love. To K (IRO) this charm resembles family roots and that's what you have given me. Thank you for everything you have done for me over the years and will miss you so much.'*

In January 2024 a new Quality Assurance Framework was implemented. The revised framework aims to achieve a robust overview of practice quality and improvement using our core ethos of collaboration in a strengths-based approach. IRO involvement is considered as part of the decision making and management oversight section of the Learning Space audits. From the 64 audits completed between January and March 2024, 1.5% were graded Inadequate, 25% Requires Improvement, 62.5% Good and 11% Outstanding.



The IRO Service completed 18.5% of all Tier 2/Learning Space Audits completed within Children's Services during 2023/24. 69% of all audits completed during the year were graded as Good overall.



The IRO footprint is well evidenced and clearly documented on children's files, including mid-point reviews and via their attendance and participation in relevant meetings and reflective case discussions with managers. IROs know their children's strengths and needs well, and their input has assisted in promoting positive outcomes for the children. CLA Reviews are held in timescales and review recommendations are clear and specific. Challenge is appropriate via management alerts and support and guidance provided, such as prompts to put a trigger plan in place. Suggested actions are usually addressed in a timely manner. Very limited findings relating to what IROs could do better/differently.

Audit Service Report



Conclusion

The 2023-2024 period has seen significant progress in the services provided to Children Looked After (CLA) in Lancashire. Key achievements include increased participation in CLA reviews and the use of digital tools like 'Mind of My Own' have further supported the engagement of children and young people. Moving forward the priorities for 2024-2025 will include 'modernising CLA reviews', by working with children and young people to allow them to develop and influence CLA review best practice.

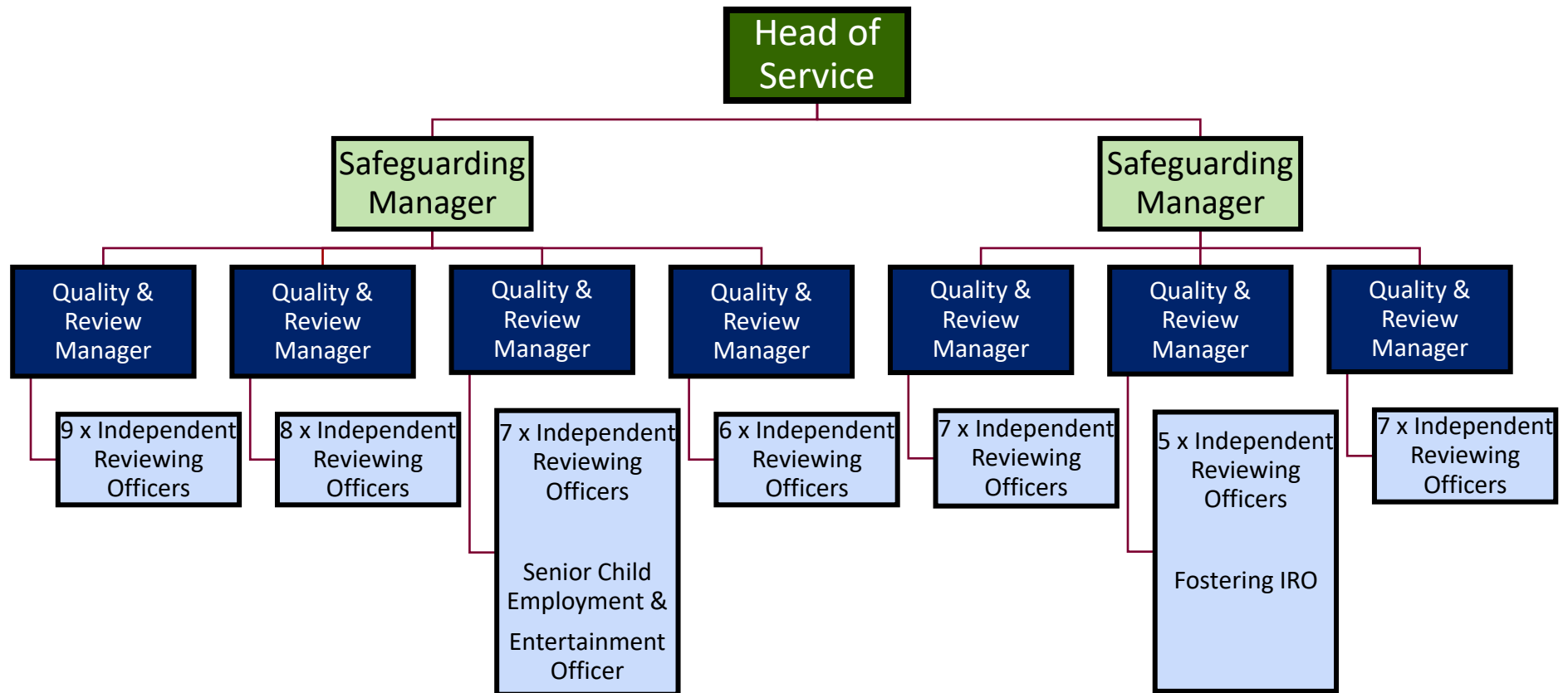
The focus on achieving permanence for children has been maintained, with a high percentage of children having a plan for permanence by their second review. IROs continue to promote life story work and we plan to build on this by ensuring IROs participate supporting a child's identity by providing goodbye letters will ensure that CLA receive the best possible care and support, leading to positive outcomes and stability in their lives.

Priorities for 2024-25

- CLA Reviews to be modernised in line with best practice and via co-production with children and young people. IROs will participate in working groups and CYP led activities to support this work.
- To increase direct participation and attendance of Children and Young People in their Children Looked After Review to at least 70%, alongside improving the quality of indirect participation via co-production and consultation.
- To ensure that 95% of Children Looked After have regular oversight of their plan and progress in between Reviews.
- IROs continue to promote life story work within case monitoring and CLA Reviews and to directly contribute towards this via IRO Goodbye Letters.
- To promote effective preparation and transitions for leaving care through post 16 years Child Looked After Reviews, including quality assurance of pathway planning, support networks, and access to health information.
- Ensure that IRO's have the knowledge and skills to deliver high quality CLA Reviews to unaccompanied children who are looked after, reflecting their specific needs, rights and entitlements.

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IRO Post Qualifying Experience

25+	9
20+	6
15+	16
10+	13
5+	2

Years as an IRO

20+	1
15+	2
10+	7
5+	23
0-5	13

Years as a Q&R Manager

10+	1
5+	3
0-5	3

Q&R Post Qualifying Experience

20+	2
15+	4
10+	1