

Worcestershire Children First



Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2019/2020

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Introduction:

This report captures the performance, feedback and next steps of the IRO Service in Worcestershire for the year 2019/2020. In Worcestershire we want our services to be embedded in a vision and values of Worcestershire being a wonderful place for all children and young people, we listen to them and respond to their needs, we promote their education, we respect and empower family life and act to protect them from harm – our vision is key to the IRO Service and our Improvement Journey as this structures our work and focus.



Contents:

1. Context of the IRO Service
2. The IRO Service in Worcestershire
3. Staff Supervision & Training
4. How do we know we have improved?
5. Health Check Findings
6. Looked after Review Meetings
7. Mind of My Own
8. Children’s Participation and & Attendance
9. Quality Assurance
10. DRPs/Practice Acknowledgements
11. Our Covid-19 Response
12. Analysis & Recommendations

1. Context of the IRO Service

The responsibility of Local Authorities is to provide Looked after Children and Care Leavers the best possible experiences in life and support their hopes, wishes and aspirations as any good parent should, this is our privileged role as corporate parents. The Children Act 1989 [amended 2004] and the Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 specify the duties of the Local Authority to appoint an IRO when a child first becomes looked after. The IRO should ensure that the Local Authority gives due consideration to any views expressed by the child and the IRO has a responsibility to monitor the Local Authority's performance of its functions in relation to the child's case.

The regulations clearly specify circumstances when the Local Authority should consult with the IRO, for example, proposed change of placement, change of education plan, or serious incident. They also specify the actions that the IRO must take if it is felt that the Local Authority is failing to comply with the Regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child. The statutory duties of the IRO are to (section 25b (1), 1989 Act

- Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's care journey.
- Participate in any review of the child
- Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration
- Perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations

The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and those actions in the care plan are consistent with the LA legal responsibilities towards the child. There are now two clear and separate aspects of the function of the IRO;

- Chairing the child's review meeting and monitoring the child's care journey on an ongoing basis.
- The monitoring function should include identifying any areas of poor practice or drift and delay in care planning that impacts directly on the child and should be appropriately escalated. Equally the IRO should also recognise and celebrate good practice that has positively impacted on the child's care experience.

2. The IRO Service in Worcestershire

The IRO service is situated within the Safeguarding Quality Assurance Service alongside the Independent Chairs for Child Protection Conferences and the LADO Service; the service is supported by a Business Support Team; each Team has a dedicated Practice Manager. The Service is under overall direct management of the Group Manager for SQA, Daniel Gray.

We have a diverse team of IRO in terms of gender, ethnicity and age and all bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the team. All have been Team Managers and/or Service Managers – this enables us to have a robust service embedded in practice wealth.

The IRO Service is at full establishment and we have achieved a fully staffed and permanent workforce; this is a strength of the Team and brings consistency and stability for children who are looked after. The Team is supported by the SQA Business Support Team that is managed by a dedicated Senior Administrator.

3. Staff Supervision & Training

Supervision:

All IROs have bi-monthly supervision with the Practice Manager as well as other support & development opportunities. In addition to receiving one to one supervision the service has several mechanisms to ensure that we are sharing information and promoting practice development, these are:

- **Monthly Meetings:** Monthly team meetings where information is shared from across the service, ideas are brought to the table, and we invite speakers in and track agreed team actions.
- **SQA Service Meetings:** these meetings are held twice a year for the whole of the SQA service – we celebrate our achievements and look to focus on areas of improvement.
- **Signs of Safety:** The whole team have completed the two-day Signs of Safety training and five members of the team have completed the five-day training; they are Practice Champions for the IRO Service. IROs use a strength and relationship-based approach to Children’s Reviews and this is applied through the Signs of Safety Model of Practice.
- **End to End Leadership Meeting:** End to End Leadership Meetings are bi-monthly meetings for all Senior Managers, Front Line Managers, Advanced Practitioners and IROs/CP Chairs from across the service. This is a forum to share and celebrate good practice, disseminate key information and build relationships with wider staff.

4. How do we know we have improved?

Ofsted said;

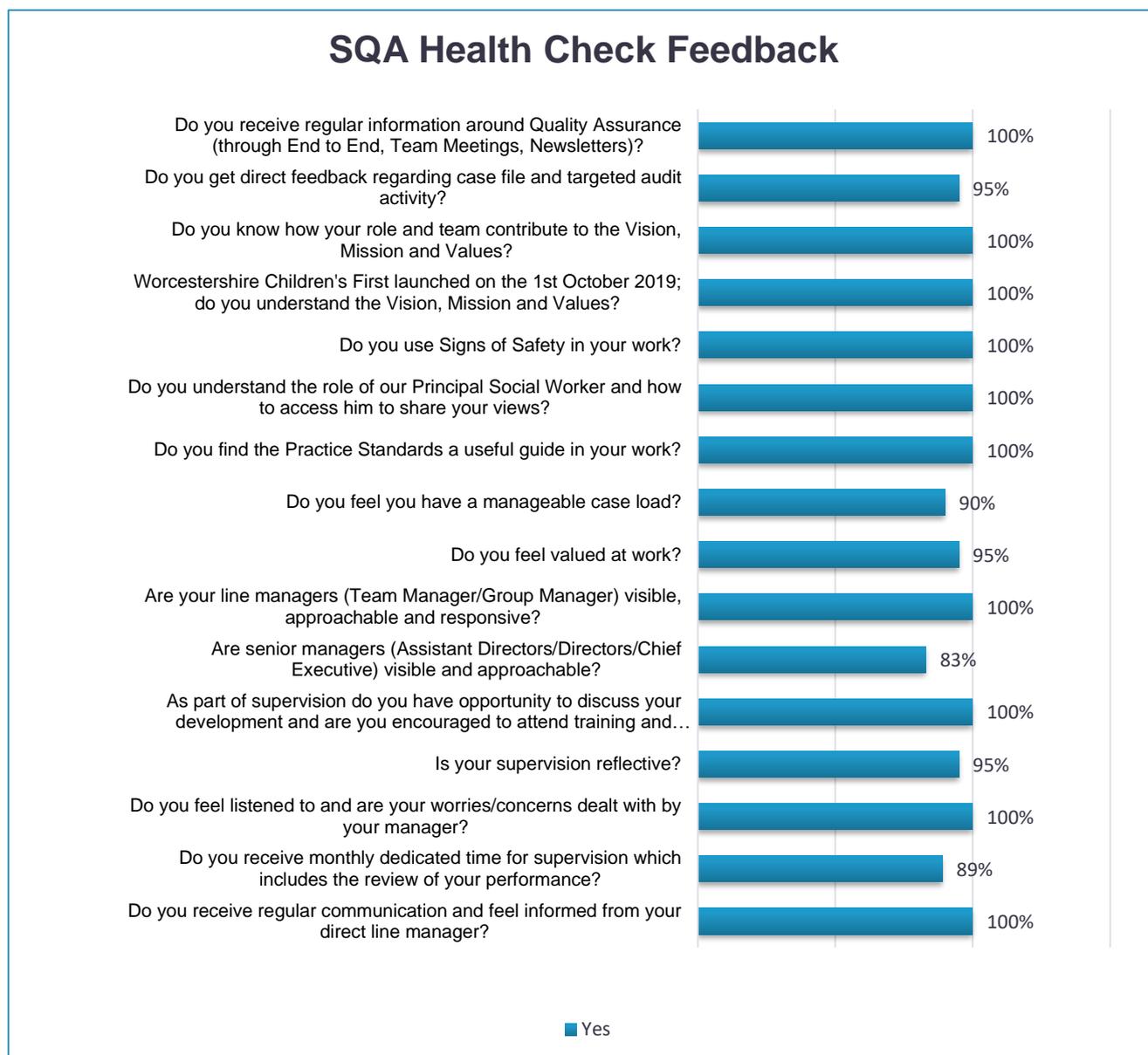
“Children are encouraged to participate in their care planning reviews, which are well chaired by independent reviewing officers (IROs). Records of reviews are written to the child in a supportive and meaningful way to help them understand the decisions about their lives. Care plans are comprehensive, are updated regularly and are well matched to children’s individual needs. IROs are active in ensuring that plans progress without delay in most cases. IROs use a well-developed escalation process to resolve practice issues” (June 2019)

"The timeliness and quality of children looked after reviews have improved. Independent reviewing officers involve children and ensure that their voices are heard when children’s care plans are being reviewed. Reviews progress children’s plans by setting increasingly detailed actions with timescales for completion. In some cases, it is heartening to see emerging good practice in the way that independent reviewing officers are recording review meetings. These records address the child directly in a way that the child will understand either now or in the future, depending on their age. This enables children to understand their care experience and the decisions made that affect their lives" (October 2018)



5. Health Check Findings

The health-check is an important tool in supporting and delivering effective Social Work. It is a key element and covers the requirement to have a 'clear social work accountability framework'. In Worcestershire this is one way we want to hear the views of Social Workers and the experiences they have in this role. Worcestershire Children's Social Care undertakes bi-annual Health Check's with Social Workers from across the service to act as a barometer for service improvement from the voice of Social Workers. The SQA Service is included within the Health Check and this was most recently undertaken in December 2019, the specific key findings for SQA Reported:



The findings of the Health Check evidenced strength within the SQA Service regarding how staff feel in their role and team. This has remained a strong response from the SQA Service with key strengths in:

- Communication
- Training & CPD
- Visible and approachable managers

6. Looked after Review Meetings

Timely looked after reviews are essential to effective and timely care planning for children and young people who are looked after. A key priority of SQA was to improve the timeliness of review meetings held in Worcestershire for our children. The below graphs demonstrate the improving trend of review meeting timeliness, the year 2019/2020 saw a total of 2138 Reviews held – the average in time meeting for the year 92% with a high of 99%.

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
18/19	75%	95%	90%	86%	76%	93%	93%	88%	97%	91%	85%	95%
19/20	97%	94%	92%	93%	93%	88%	92%	91%	93%	86%	88%	99%

It is an on-going service priority to promote and achieve timely review meetings and that this success is sustained, as a team we use an individual IRO Diagnostic Tool. This promotes IRO independence but also their accountability to ensure that they are working towards holding meetings in a timely manner – this is completed each month by the individual IRO and reviewed in supervision as part of performance management of the service.

The SQA Dashboard provides us with up to date and accurate performance information that updates every 24 hours; this strengthens both micro and macro review of performance, holding individual workers to account but also Managers.

7. Mind of My Own

Mind of My Own is an interactive app for children & young people to communicate with their IRO and supports them to prepare for their reviews. In the year 2019/2020 194 statements were received – 46 of these were preparing for reviews.

Number of One Statements sent (by workers and young people)	163
Number of Express Statements sent (by workers)	31
Total statements sent to Worcestershire Children's Services (One and Express)	194

STATEMENT TYPE	SENT BY YOUNG PEOPLE	SENT BY WORKERS	TOTAL
Totals	67	96	163
Foster Care Review	5	39	44
My Life	1	0	1
My Wellbeing	1	4	5
Post Meeting	2	1	3
Preparation	12	34	46
Problem	13	0	13
Share Good News	2	4	6
Worker Visit	31	14	45

8. Children's Participation and Attendance

IRO Introduction Cards:

IRO Introduction Cards are small cards given to all children and young people, so they know clearly who their IRO is and how to contact them. Feedback from the young people is that they like the cards and it helps them to understand who the IRO is and what they look like and a little bit of information about them, the cards are the size of credit cards and Young people keep them in their wallets or the back of their phone cases.



KERRY WILLIAMS

Phone me: 07809 586223
Email me: kewilliams@worcestershire.gov.uk
Out of hours (EOT): 01905 768020*
* This will be whoever is on duty when you ring

Promoting children's participation and attendance within Looked after Reviews is essential to ensure their voice is captured, listened to and that our outcomes are based on their wishes and feelings.

Participation:

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
18/19	97%	93%	89%	92%	94%	97%	95%	93%	92%	96%	92%	94%
19/20	96%	92%	93%	94%	94%	91%	96%	96%	95%	93%	94%	90.7%

In the year 2019/2020 we had an average of 94% of children and young people participating in reviews with a high of 96%. This has remained consistent from the previous 12 months. Participation in 2017/2018 was at an average of 75% - so an increase of 19% in two years. We saw a small drop in participation in March 2020 compared to the rest of the 2019/2020; this is when we began to move to virtual working and a change in our service delivery in response to Covid-19. As we have established this way of working the average participation for Quarter 1 of 2020/2021 has increased back to an average of 95%.

Attendance:

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
18/19	70%	64%	58%	68%	72%	72%	72%	73%	62%	73%	77%	76%
19/20	69%	67%	68%	60%	72%	64%	70%	65%	52%	65%	62%	50%

In the year 2018/2019 we had an average attendance of children at reviews of 64% with a high of 72%. In the previous 12 months the average of attendance at reviews was 70%, so there has been an average drop of 6% across the year. We will be undertaking a targeted audit on Attendance of CLA Reviews to understand this change and focus our work on ensuring attendance for children and young people in their reviews. There was a higher drop in attendance in March and we need to understand this – we will be undertaking a targeted audit on this area of practice.

IRO Direct Contact Summary Episodes: these are specific case notes to capture IRO Visits and phone calls to children and young people between Review meetings, to strengthen their footprint, evidence their work and to capture children and young people’s views. This was introduced in August 2018, and between that point and end of 2018/2019 IROs completed 233 direct contacts. *In the year 2019/2020 a total of 1155 direct contacts between IROs and children/young people took place to hear and promote their wishes and feelings.*

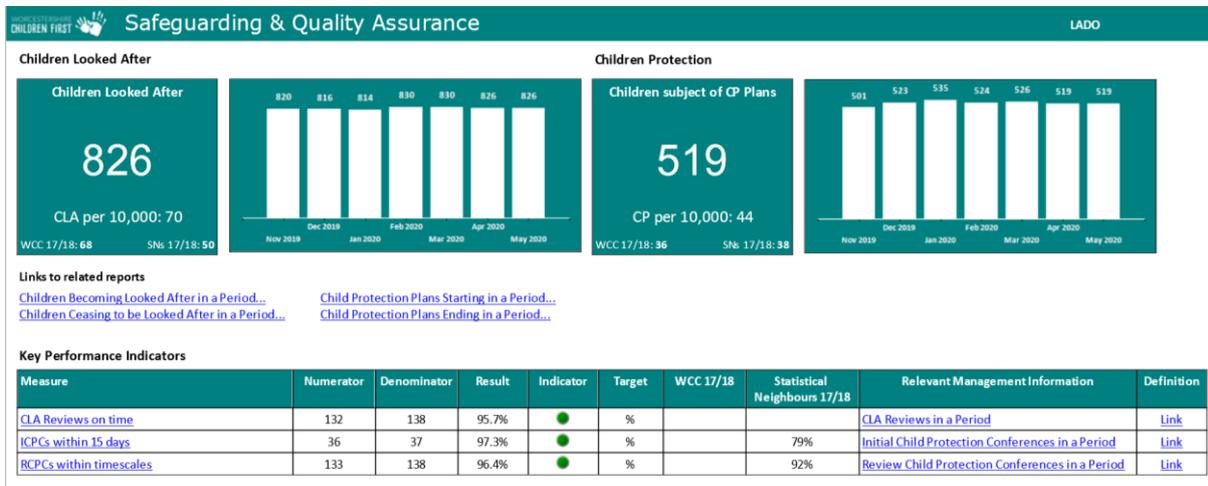
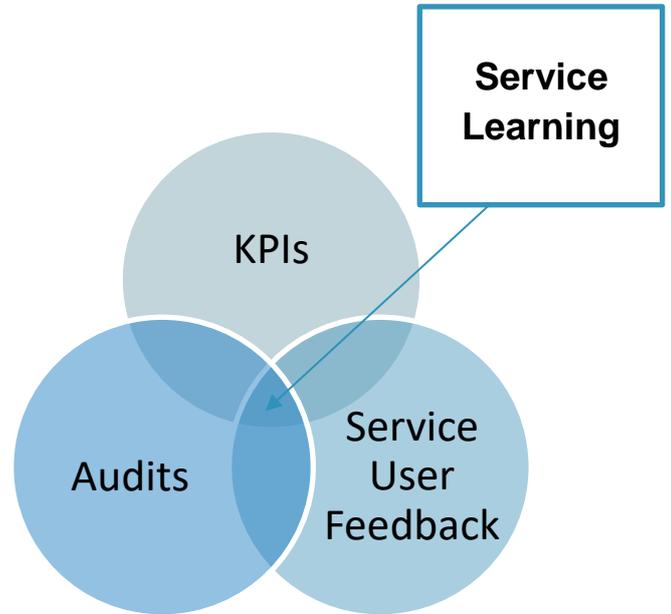
9. Quality Assurance

How do we Quality Assure Safeguarding Quality Assurance:

In SQA we have systems to Quality Assure our work, this is through Key Performance Information, Service User Feedback and Audits.

KPIs:

KPIs are one focus of quality but this gives us an indication of our work and that this is timely for children, we have developed a robust Dashboard that is accessible to all IROs and the Managers to review performance that is accurate and up to date.



Our KPIs are reported above in this report, our CLA Review Timescales, Attendance and Participation.

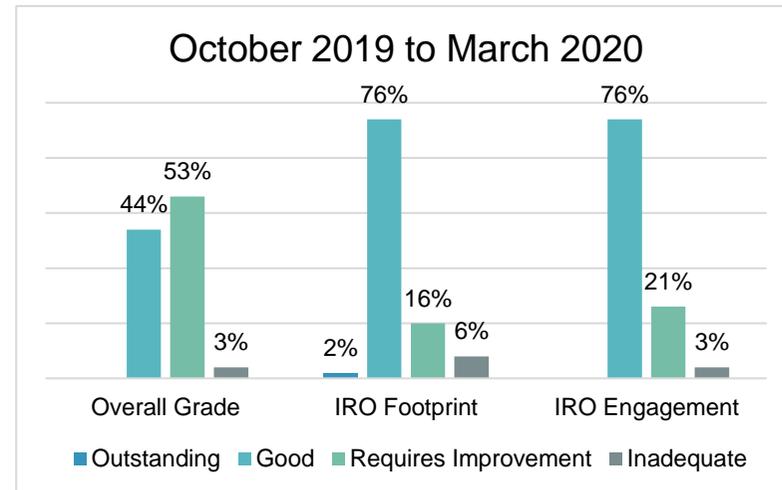
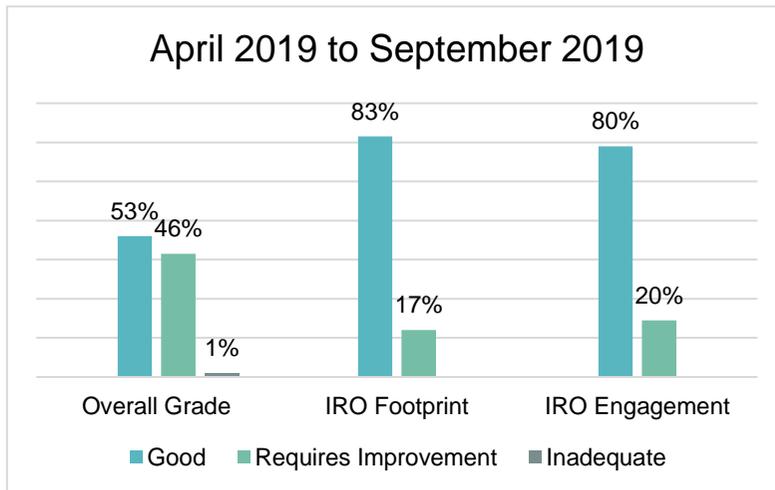
Audits:

In SQA we undertake quarterly targeted audits to review the work of the IRO Service and to evidence our work and improvement, these are reported in the Quality Assurance Reports for Children’s Social Care.

Mid-Way Audits:

In 2019/2020 we completed 199 mid-way audits in the IRO Service.

- Across the year we have identified strengths through our IRO Footprint and Engagement, and this has been a consistent theme of the mid-way IRO Audits.
- The volume of audits and feedback completed by the IRO Service is a strength
- Across 2019/2020 a total of 105 families gave us feedback through the IRO Mid-Way Audits



Across the year we have identified strengths through our IRO Footprint and Engagement, and this has been a consistent theme of the mid-way IRO Audits. The volume of audits and feedback completed by the IRO Service is a strength – our footprint and engagement grades are strongly graded as Good.

Targeted Audits:

We have completed two targeted audits in the IRO Service for 14 children, these focused on DRPs and Mid-Way Audits – below is a summary of these targeted audits and the outcomes.

Targeted Audit Theme	Number of Children	Key Learning Points	Embedded Document
Dispute Resolution Audit	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 Child Protection and 3 Children Looked After cases reviewed; in all cases the DRP had been completed and response of the manager accepted as appropriate by SQA. • Application of DRP was appropriate in all cases to progress plans for children. • DRPs not consistently being completed within the required timescales; 2 cases were not responded to within the required timeframe. 	 2019-12-11 DRP Targeted Audit.docx
Mid-Way Audit Review	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 out of 8 audits the final judgement was agreed with by the moderator. • Evidence of an effective IRO/Chair footprint and effective use of DRP when completed. • IRO Review Minutes were written to the child. • When Service User Feedback was sought this was positive. • All audits are sent directly to managers, so they are aware of learning and actions. • 1 audit was judged to be good, however, one sub-grade had been judged to be inadequate – this was therefore a limiting judgement in management oversight and therefore the final grade of good was not appropriate • Ensure actions of audits are consistently recorded and when service user feedback is not sought, record the reason why. 	 2019-12-11 Mid-Way Targeted Au

Service User Feedback:

Feedback is obtained through audits, compliments/complaints and targeted feedback. Across 2019/2020 a total of 105 families gave us feedback through the IRO Mid-Way Audits, they told us:

Question	Quarter 1-2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
Can you contact your Social Worker when you need to/do you feel listened to?	79% said yes	87% said yes	86% said yes
Do you feel safe where you live?	87% said yes	100% said yes	100% said yes
Are you happy with the way your reviews are chaired by your IRO?	87% said yes	100% said yes	86% said yes

We have also undertaken a piece of targeted feedback with children and young people, 30 gave us feedback, they told us:

Question	Feedback
Do you get opportunities to speak to your IRO on your own if you want to?	80% said yes, 10% said they didn't want to and 10% said no
Do you understand why you are looked after?	97% said yes and 3% said no
Are you clear about the plans made at your review and what is going to happen next?	87% said yes and 13% said no
Did people do what they agreed to do at your last review?	80% said yes and 20% said no
Do you know how to contact your IRO?	97% said yes and 3% said no

Over 2019/2020 we had feedback from 135 children & families who gave us feedback on our services. Our Business Plan has a focus on understanding families experiences, we want children and families to be able to understand their meetings and plans, and to make sure we know what they think and how they feel about things happening in their lives. As we move forward, we have developed our Service User Feedback questions in our mid-way audits to focus on this and we will also be undertaking a wider range of targeted feedback.



Feedback/Compliments:

SQA received 11 Compliments and 1 Complaint during 2019/2020, we have received the following pieces of feedback and compliments from children, parents and carers:

I had the pleasure in attending a LAC review recently which was wonderfully chaired by Sarah Roberts. The review was expertly handled by Sarah who was professional and understanding, who also the genuine ability to put everyone present at complete ease and was able to install calm and reassurance to birth parents and keep the review on a level that was acceptable to all concerned. Thankyou Sarah it was a pleasure and privilege to witness a true professional at work.

Can I just say that I loved the way the meeting was so child centred; even though S is only 4 months old I felt like she was a huge part of the meeting and that the decisions you made were in her best interests not only now but in the future...exactly how it should be. I felt that we were all involved in the meeting and working together to ensure this beautiful little girl gets everything she deserves. I hope to work with you again in the future.

My experience with Sally has been brilliant, my daughter was on a care order just short of 2 years and in that time Sally has been very supportive but also professional where everything has been really positive and a little concern raised and she was very firm with getting the concern dealt with but was supportive with me and reassured me at the same time what was nice for me as I tend to panic about most things. Sally was very good with my daughter, interacted with her and my daughter enjoyed Sally company. What helped me the most was how down to earth Sally was but also professional and firm. I also liked that Sally would text me back or get back to me rather than not respond to leave my mind to wonder. I really felt she was only there for my daughter and didn't feel like she was siding with local authority or siding with me. She was very independent and only ever had my daughter's best interest at heart.

A foster carer stated that Sarah had been consistent throughout the family's involvement with children Services and had been there from the start. She said that the birth father had a lot of respect for her and stated that Sarah had been very fair throughout.

A young person came to his lac review with a bunch of flowers for Kerry (the IRO) and a thank you card. He wrote 'thank you for everything you have done for me'.

I wouldn't change a thing I was really pleased how everything went and the support we received and getting guidance when we need it and it isn't easy but getting praise and recognition from people like yourself shows us we are doing a good job and makes us feel we are and also makes it all worthwhile thank you.

A young person said thank you, Gabby, for all your help, you are amazing.

Thank you so much for everything you did, she (the child) was one very lucky young lady to have had such a kind and conscientious IRO and the local authority are very lucky to have you as part of their team.



10. DRPs & Practice Acknowledgements:

A crucial role of the IRO is to quality assure the work of the Local Authority; if a concern arises then the Dispute Resolution Process is initiated, this is a process where the IRO can raise a concern for a child or young person and the Social Work Manager will respond.

We have a clear DRP Framework and this is available to all staff on Practice Standards – Social Care.

The IRO Service also looks to identify and celebrate good practice; this is achieved through a Practice Acknowledgement. This is a specific Liquid Logic Form where the IRO can formally record and recognise practice of Social Work Teams.

Our DRP Summary for 2019/2020:



2020-06-02 DRP
Summary Report 201

This report summarises the use of DRPs and Practice Acknowledgements across 2019/2020 – this report tells us that we have seen:

- A decrease in Informal and Formal DRPs being issued across the service from the previous 12 months
- A higher number of Informal DRPs being issued – supporting to resolve matters at an early stage
- An increase in Practice Acknowledgements – evidencing good practice from the previous year
- The development of our DRP Dashboard to now support our weekly, monthly & quarterly analysis and tracking of DRPs
- Over the next 12 months we need a focus on ensuring DRP responses are completed consistently within the required timescales

Our SQA Business Plan has a focus on DRPs, ensuring these are targeted in the right areas and have an impact on the improvement of children's plans. We have done a piece of targeted work to provide examples of when to complete a DRP and have developed our DRP Dashboards to help us track and understand the use of DRP. We are also undertaking a targeted DRP Audit jointly between Through Care and SQA.

11. Covid-19 Response

At the end of 2019/2020 the Government Announced lockdown in response to Covid-19. Worcestershire Children First Social Care & Safeguarding developed our Covid-19 Service Delivery Protocol. An Executive Summary of this plan can be found at the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership website:

<https://www.safeguardingworcestershire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-06-01-WCF-Safeguarding-Covid19-Phase-2-Exec-Summary-V1.pdf>

Review Meetings:

We have continued to hold Looked after Review Meetings for children & young people, we have ensured that these meetings continue to be held within timescales, these have been virtual meetings with families and partners joining online – these have been successful meetings. As of 23-03-2020 and 17-06-2020, we have held reviews for 408 children, 97% of these meetings have been held within timescales. Participation has continued to be positive, with 94% of children participating in their review meetings and 55% attending virtually.

Direct Contacts:

IROs have continued to contact children and young people to Keep in Touch with them during the period of Covid-19 Response, since the 23-03-2020 to 17-06-2020, IROs have completed 186 Keeping in Touch calls to looked after children & young people.

Statutory Looked after Visits:

As part of the response in our Covid-19 Protocol, Independent Reviewing Officers have been undertaking Statutory Visits who are placed in out-of-county External Residential and IFA placements; these visits will be undertaken at the point of the child's looked after review and either 12 weeks before or 12 weeks after their review. To date IROs have undertaken 32 visits to children and these are tracked weekly between the IRO Practice Manager and Through Care Group Manager.

School Places:

For all vulnerable children (i.e. those subject to a child in need plan, child protection plan or looked after) attendance at school plays a significant part in their plan to promote their welfare, achieve good educational outcomes and minimise and manage risk of harm. This has been recognised by Government office and the DfE. During community lockdown and the semi closure of schools the maintenance of the school place for vulnerable children has always been a priority with parents "encouraged" to use the school placements available.

In our initial emergency response, we recognised the challenges for schools in managing capacity given the expected impact on staffing capacity and the anxiety in parents in protecting their children from catching the virus. Initially we "encouraged" parents of children subject to CIN and CP plans to attend we discouraged professional carers of looked after children where there were no concerns with regards to potential placement breakdown.

We are now eight weeks into understanding and managing the Corona Virus. Whilst of course learning will continue and there is always exception to any rule, what we do know is Covid19 is here to stay for a long time yet so plans now need to look at more medium-term ways of living with it. This is the driver for the Government programme to start the road to reopening our society.

The re-opening of schools is also part of the Government recovery programme. Schools have been issued with guidance on how to open safely and this includes a comprehensive health and safety risk management of the premises and a staged opening for groups of children and young people.

This combination covers planning on how to accommodate children and young people in school and education them whilst managing the risk of them contracting the Corona virus.

For our “vulnerable” children the guidance has reinforced more strongly the need for vulnerable children to be attending school and the wording has gone from “strongly encourage” to “expectation”.

In the interests of the child

- As a safeguarding service we know longer term non-school attendance will be an increasingly concerning factor in managing risk.
- For Looked after children we know they are at risk of poorer educational outcomes than their non looked after peers.
- Children are telling us in calls and visits they want to go to school, they are bored, and they are missing their friends.

Longer term absence from school cannot therefore be in their best interests.

So, whilst we have been supportive of school capacity and we have understood the anxieties of parents, we now need to reinforce the government message, and our own, that school attendance is part of a vulnerable child’s support and protection and to reinforce the assurance that schools are taking comprehensive planning to ensure they are safe places to be.

So, unless the child or young person is a shielded child or they are living with a shielded family member, they are “expected” to take up their school place.

12. Analysis & Recommendations

What are we worried about?	What's working well?	What do we need to do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that our individual month on month performance remains consistent in respect of timely reviews, attendance and participation. • Ensure we consistently use DRPs and track that these are responded to consistently within the required timescales. • Ensure a focus on Attendance of children & young people as we have seen a year reduction of 6%. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviews held in time – continued positive KPI. • Children's participation in their reviews has sustained improvement across the year. • IROs are communicating with children between reviews with a total of 1155 direct contacts. • Ofsted feedback on the IRO Service was positive. • We are developing our quality assurance activity and mid-way audits are a strength. • Children's Reviews are written to children rather than using professional jargon. • Service User Feedback has told us that children know who their IROs are, how to contact them and understand their reviews and outcomes. • We have responded to Covid-19 Service Delivery and we are continuing to hold Reviews in a timely manner. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A relentless focus on ensuring meetings are held in a timely manner for children and they receive a timely record of their meeting. 2. A continued passion of IROs to enable children and young people to attend and participate in their reviews – continued focus on ensuring IROs see and speak with children between their reviews. 3. Complete a Targeted Audit on Attendance in CLA Reviews to focus improvement in this area. 4. Continue to promote a business as usual approach to Quality Assurance. 5. Ensure our DRPs are consistently responded to in timescales. 6. Embed our skills in the new recording system – Liquidlogic. 7. Continued work on the Social Care & Safeguarding Business Plan – this is an End to End Business Plan, SQA working with the wider service for improvements for children who are looked after.