



Worcestershire Children First

OUR VISION

Worcestershire to be a wonderful place for all children and young people to grow up.

WORCESTERSHIRE
CHILDREN FIRST



OUR MISSION

Supporting children and young people to be happy, healthy and safe.

OUR VALUES



CHILDREN AT OUR HEART

We will keep children and young people at the heart of everything we do.



VALUE FAMILY LIFE

We will support and empower parents to care for their own children.



GOOD EDUCATION FOR ALL

We will value education as the best start in life for all children and young people.



PROTECTION FROM HARM

We will act in a professional and timely way to protect children from harm.



EMBRACE DIVERSITY

A progressive culture of championing equality, diversity and inclusion.

Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2022 / 2023

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Introduction:

This report captures the performance, feedback, and next steps of the IRO Service in Worcestershire for the year 2022/2023. The report provides an evidence base for what's working well, what we need to improve on, the impact our service is having on children and young people and where our priorities are focused for the year ahead.

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Executive Summary:

This executive summary highlights what we know about ourselves in the IRO Service

What is Working Well...

Areas for Focus...

The Annual Report has evidenced sustained practice for the IRO Service

Although a continuous priority, we have seen **strengths in children attending & participating in their reviews**

Seeking feedback from children & young people is a key priority for the service, through the year we have **heard from 291 children & young people** – children are supporting to attend & participate in their reviews

We have consolidated our Quality Assurance programme in respect of the IRO Service, and this has evidenced areas of good practice; this was through **audits of children's experiences** from mid-way and targeted audits

We have a **stable and experienced IRO Workforce** that enables us to deliver quality services to children & young people

From our KPI & Audit Learning we are focusing on ensuring all **our looked after reviews are held in timescales except for exceptional circumstances**

We want to ensure that the IRO consistently review and have **oversight when children go missing**

Although improving year-on-year, from our feedback we want to ensure **all children attend & participate in their meetings in the best way for them**

We want to **review and take learning** from our first period of **Post-18 Reviews**

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. Workforce & Management

The IRO service is situated with in 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, Daniel Gray.

We have a diverse team of IROs 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, apart from the member of staff currently off poorly we have achieved and maintained a fully staffed and permanent workforce; this has been a strength of the Team which brings consistency and stability for children who are looked after.

Supervision & Performance/Wellbeing Reviews:

All IROs have bi-monthly supervision with the Practice Manager as well as other support & development opportunities – in year 2022/2023 we achieved 100% compliance of achieving supervision for all staff.

All IROs complete, an individual diagnostic tool, that they send to the Practice Manager before supervision. This reflects the work the IRO has completed since last supervision and captures information such as caseload, case closures, participation, and attendance of children, formal and informal DRPs, audit activity, learning and reflection on what has gone well, any worries they have and what needs to happen; this promotes accountability for each IRO and is used in supervision with all IROs.

Each year we undertake an end of year Wellbeing & Performance Review for each member of staff – this is to reflect on achievements, areas for focus, training, and personal wellbeing; in 22/23 we achieved 100% compliance for the IRO Service and all staff achieved successful or exceeding in their end of year review.

Management:

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.
- 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/learning, and build relationships with wider staff.
- Regional Practice Meetings: All IROs are invited to the regional practice meetings with other IROs to share practice.

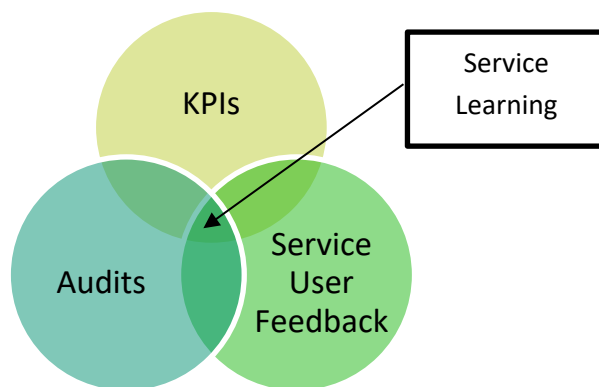
The Voice of the Workforce:

WCF undertake an Annual Voice of the Workforce Survey, this was last completed in September 2022; SQA staff reported:

- They get the support and reflective supervision required to manage the emotional demands of work
- They feel listened to, and their worries/concerns are dealt with
- Their health & wellbeing is regularly discussed as part of supervision
- New starters received an induction suitable to their role
- Feel WCF is an inclusive organisation
- Received dedicated supervision & review of their performance

3. IRO Quality Assurance

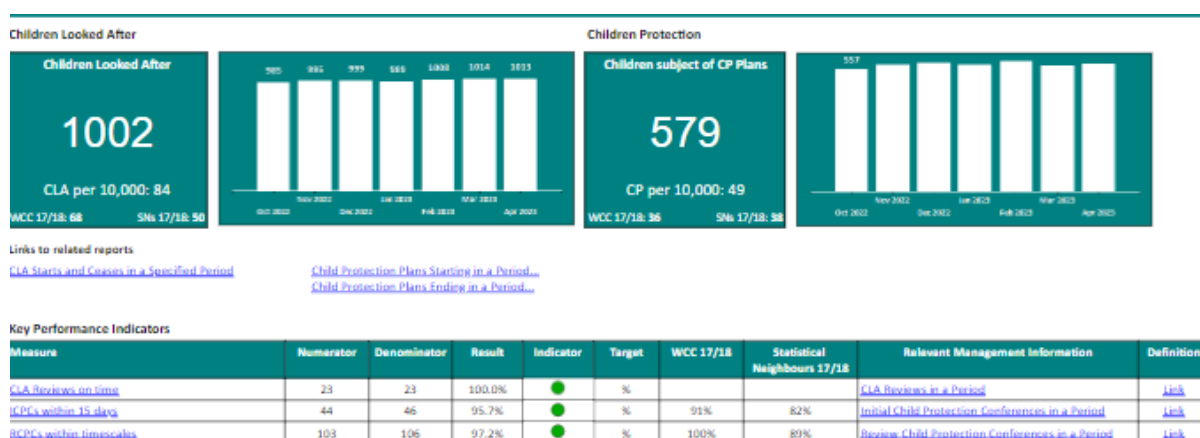
In SQA we have systems to Quality Assure our work, this is through Key Performance Information, Service User Feedback and Audits.



3.1 KPIs

The first element of the Quality Assurance approach is Key Performance Indicators, they help us understand how much we are doing and the timeliness of our work, this is the first measure of knowing ourselves well. We measure IRO Performance through the SQA Dashboard which is a live system to help us track & monitor team & individual performance.

Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Dashboard:



CLA Reviews:

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 sustain overall timely looked after review meetings for our children. 2022/2023 saw a total of 2,202 Reviews held which is an increase of 85 more reviews from 21/22 figures– the average of meetings held in time for 22/23 is 93.4% with a high of 99%.

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
21/22	98%	95%	98%	97%	96%	96%	98%	94%	96%	91%	88%	97%
22/23	95%	95%	93%	94%	99%	93%	91%	89%	98%	86%	92%	97%

There has been a reduction this year in performance for CLA reviews in some months as highlighted below. Audits undertaken regarding the dip in performance relates to miscalculation of timing of reviews from some IROs and some very late notifications of UASC young people or requests to move meetings; this is our learning to ensure timely reviews into year 23/24. This learning has been shared with the IRO Service and wider Social Care Service.

Children's Participation and Attendance:

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. This requires creativity in our approach as we work with a wide range of children with differing needs.

	Attendance 2022/2023	Participation 2022/2023
Quarter 1	68.5%	97%
Quarter 2	72.5%	98.5%
Quarter 3	69%	97%
Quarter 4	74.1%	97%
Annual	71%	97%

- In the year 2021/2022 we had an average of 64% of children attending – we see this has improved to 71%, an increase of 7%.
- In the year 2021/2022 we have an average of 93% participating; this has improved by 4% to 97%.
- Attendance & Participation is a real strength – this continues to remain a relentless focus to ensure children’s voices are heard and they are part of these important meetings and decisions about them.

IRO Direct Contact:

- These are specific case notes to capture IRO direct contact with children & young people, these may be through home visits, phone calls or virtual/teams discussions.
- These are held between CLA Review Meetings to strength IRO Footprint on the child’s record but also evidence the child’s voice.
- In the year 2022/2023 IROs completed 1506 that is an increase in the last year of 165 additional contact summaries from 1341 contacts made in 2021/22.

Leaflets to support Understanding & Participation:

During the year 2022/2023 we developed and launched leaflets to support children & young people and their parents & carers understand the role of the IRO and the Review. They are also available externally at: [Safeguarding and Quality Assurance | Worcestershire County Council](#)

Supporting children & young people to understand Advocacy and promote this service, we have a set of letters that IROs can share with children and young people through their visits and reviews, our Advocacy Service is provided by Coram Voice and information on their service can be found at: [Worcestershire - Coram Voice](#)

3.2 Service User Feedback

Feedback from children & young people is the second element of our Quality Assurance Framework, this enables us to hear their voice but also understand their experiences of our services, this section will report on:

1. Emotional Health & Wellbeing
2. End of Placement Feedback
3. IRO Activity Event
4. Feedback on the IRO Service

Emotional Health & Wellbeing:

This year we developed and launched an Emotional Health & Wellbeing Survey, this is a survey IROs undertake with children and young people who are looked after. The approach is conversational between the IRO and the child, it can be undertaken during the CLA Review, on a visit or part of another direct contact. It is intended to support discussions on emotional health, wellbeing, and trusted adults in children's lives. Following these conversations, the outcomes are built into the reviews for the child.

This launched in October 2022, between this time and the end of March 2023 191 children & young people shared their views, we also capture the outcomes in a simple survey form recorded by IROs – this supports us to understand the volume of discussions that are being held and the headline outcomes.

Children & young people shared their views with us, they told us...

- 93% felt that their emotional health & wellbeing is being well supported
- 93% felt they could talk to their carers about their feelings and their carer listens and helps them
- 93% felt they could contact a professional to get help and support
- 97% felt that they had a trusted adult in their own network (friends, family, carers) to speak to and get help

End of Placement Feedback:

Based on the success of the Emotional Health & Wellbeing we have redeveloped our End of Placement Feedback approach, again this is conversational and will enable us to understand the experiences of children & young people following moving placements.

Again, the experiences of children & young people will be built into their reviews and on-going work, however, the headline findings will also be captured in a survey which will help us understand children's experiences.

This information will enable us to see information broken down by when placements disrupt or is a planned ending, it will also identify the type of placement and key information regarding the child's experience of living there.

This launched in April 2023, we will see first outcome information in report form from end of Quarter 1 23/24 onwards.

IRO Activity Event:

In 2018 the IRO Service developed and ran an annual activity event for Looked after Children, however during the Covid Pandemic we had to pause these activities. In the year 22/23 we relaunched these and the first one was held in April 2022; they will be repeated annually each Easter.



IRO ACTIVITY MORNING

Perdiswell Young People's Leisure Club
21 April 2022

Over 60 children (up to the age of 13) and their carers attended and enjoyed our activity morning.

Activities included:

- Pizza making
- Balloon modelling
- Easter cake decorations
- Bouncy castle
- Basketball
- Arts and craft tables
- Nail art and fake tattoo table

The day was a real success with lots of positive feedback from children and carers including:

"It was great! I liked all of it. I loved making the playfight swords."

"I had fun. I liked the bouncy castle and slide. I liked making new friends and making balloons. Thank you for inviting me."

"I loved being here even though I was a bit nervous and I made a new friend."

"Had a super time. Thank you."

What's next?

We interviewed five sets of carers about their experience of the IRO service which will be shared with the IRO annual report. An activity session is planned for our 13+ young people in October.

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Foster Carers also shared their views with us on the day about the IRO Service, you can watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuriUIGwxOE>

Targeted Survey with Children Looked After:

We undertook a targeted survey across October 2022-Jan 2023 with looked after children. In total 100 children gave their views, they told us:

Question	Responses 22/23
Did you have the-opportunity to speak with your IRO before your looked after review?	92% said yes - the 8% who did not have this conversation reported that they did not want to speak to their IRO
Did the IRO help you understand their role?	91% said yes
Did the IRO help explain how the review was going to work?	93% said yes
Do you understand the plan from the review and what everyone will do next?	92% said yes
Did the meeting recognise what was going well for you?	92% said yes
CLA Reviews are being undertaken in a blended approach, between face-to-face and virtual meetings. Were you supported to attend and contribute to the meeting?	87% said yes
If you attended, how did you attend?	73% attended their meeting 13% chose to have a separate meeting/discussion with their IRO 14% did not attend but reported this was their choice
Were you given the opportunity to share your views and opinions?	90% said yes
Did the review hear your views and consider them?	90% said yes

- The vast majority of feedback from children & young people demonstrated high quality practice by the IRO Service.
- Children & young people are having the opportunity to speak with their IRO, understand their plan and attend their review, where they are not attending...children are telling us that this was their choice.
- As a service we respond to all feedback and remains a key priority to support children and young people’s attendance & participation into CLA Reviews and their plan.

“Emma is really nice, and I know I can go to her if I have any worries”

“My meetings are The Chelsey Show!”

“Kerry is amazing!”

“I can speak to Fred if I need to”

“Sometimes the decisions aren't acted on after the meeting”

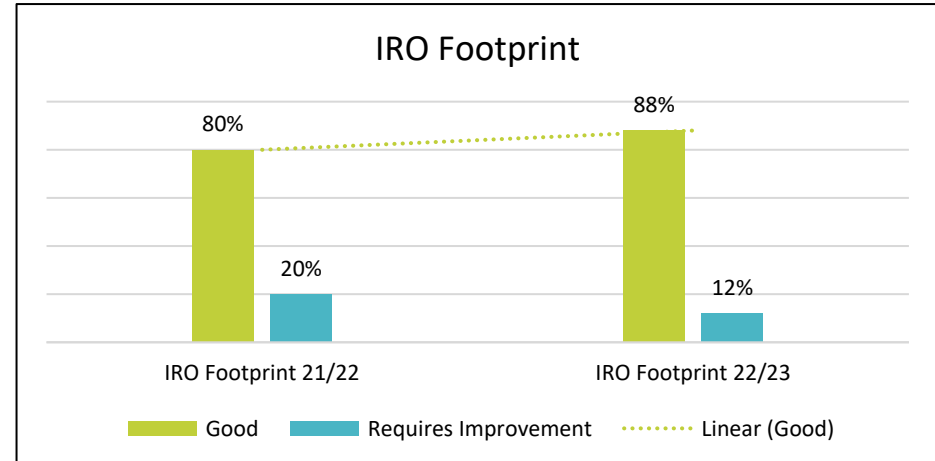
“I’ve only met Jemma once but she's really friendly and nice and she listens”

3.3 Audit Activity

Audit activity is the third strand of our Quality Assurance Framework, over 2022/2023 we have continued our auditing activity to review the quality of our work, learning is shared with the IRO Service through individual feedback, reports, and team meetings.

Mid-Way Audits:

In 2022/2023 the IRO service completed 86 mid-way audits; these record the IROs Quality Assurance on case-records and feedback is sent to the Team Manager, however, these audits evidence strengths in the services footprint and this has improved from the previous year.



Targeted Audits:

We also undertake Targeted Audits to evidence our Practice, below is a headline summary of our activity this year:

Theme	Headline Learning
IRO Footprint & Minutes (End of Year Summary)	<p>Prior to each IRO Supervision the IRO Practice Manager dip-samples the quality of footprint and minutes for that IRO, it is recorded within their individual supervision record.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is encouraging to see the minutes are in the main comprehensive and the quality is good there is evidence of improved consistency in the style of writing, but all have a SOS approach recognising strengths, worries and what needs to happen. • IRO footprint evidenced a consistent improvement in IRO footprint on Childrens files over the last 12 months, overall evident on Childrens files and written in a different colour text for easy reference. • IROs to be mindful re language used so it is easy to read and clear with minimal jargon in it • Actions should have clear timescales and person responsible for each task – although we see this improve across the year • IROs to evidence greater depth re identity section and an introduction to the IRO role • IROs should continue to evidence that a discussion has taken place re emotional health and wellbeing of YP

<p>Post-18 Needs Assessments (Quarter 4)</p>	<p>In August 2022 we piloted the IROs completing a Post-18 Needs Assessment for all looked after children turning 18; this was to determine risks/needs and the young person’s consent if on-going IRO involvement was required for the young person once they had turned 18 – this is part of the Care Leavers Local Offer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All needs assessments and outcomes were proportionate to the identifying needs • There were examples of the IRO considering the balance of need and consent • 1 example was written directly to the young person, and this made the needs assessment very personal if they were to read this in the future • Not all post-18 needs assessments are being completed in a timely manner • The form does not allow you to not tick one of the options of concern – therefore we need to add a “no factors identified” box to the checklist; this has now been completed • Although the comments of the IROs were appropriate and proportionate, they did not always explicitly say this is why there will be no post-18 review and by adding this will ensure we are explicit in our decisions
<p>CLA Reviews (Quarter 3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 CLA Reviews were reviewed within the audit, across the 6 reviews there was evidence of records of meetings being distributed • CLA Reviews are written to children and young people directly, this makes review records personal and meaningful. In one example the review opens by stating “<i>Dear Cyrus this report is written primarily for, and to, you</i>”, this was a strong example of making these key records personal • There were strong examples of children being able to attend & participate in meetings in different ways and IROs visiting and seeing children • IRO footprint was evidence in all cases, in the majority the IRO used a different colour within case notes, and this made their footprint shine through and evidence their work • An area of development of the past 12 months was the review of Contact Arrangements and next steps – this was clear in records, and it was evident that this learning has been taken into practice • We have recently refocused the work on physical health and emotional health & wellbeing, although some reviews evidence good practice some were not as explicit and could be developed – these reviews were from September 2022. This has been a focus this quarter (Oct – Dec ‘22) with an amendment to the health section and greater focus on EHWB – we will review this in the next audit to see these developments • IRO recommendations were clear with owners and timescales – this is an improvement in practice. In 2 cases the TM has not said whether they agree or disagree the recommendations, this is an area of focus for Through Care Team Managers and will be shared with the Through Care Group Manager

<p>CLA Review Recommendations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review Records are well written and directly to the children, in all Reviews considered the review record was on the child’s record • Most actions written are specific and relevant for the child and their care plan – language used is accessible to children and would be understood • Most cases the manager has reviewed the recommendations of the CLA Review • Although there are examples of good practice around timescales, this is not consistent and we need to ensure we don’t use language such as ASAP or on-going, this is too open to interpretation. We need to ensure we consistently use a clear timescale or a review date of that action, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ At times the use of “ongoing” is used – this is not appropriate, we need to see specific measurables, what do we want to see and how will this be measured? The timescales then being the management supervision or a TAC Meeting/Get Safe Meeting etc ○ At times the use of “ASAP” is used – this is not appropriate; we need to see specific timescales such as “this is an immediate action to be completed the same day as the review” or “this is a priority action for completion within 3 working days to include feedback to the IRO”
<p>CLA Reviews & Identity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 Reviews were considered within the audit, all had identity section completed in the CLA review report • Good use of observation and feedback evidenced • Good recognition of family time to strengthen YP identity • Recognition of the importance of visual pictures for the child and life story work individual to child’s needs • Identity was evidenced in more detail under other headings such as contact or legal status this could be moved to identity section to strengthen

4. 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.

Informal DRPs:

- Within the service we always look to identify and resolve practice concerns at an early stage, this preventing further delays for children & families
- Across the year we saw 111 Informal DRPs undertaken; this is a small increase of 8 from the previous year where we saw 103 Informal DRP
- 67% of informal DRPs were issued in the first two quarters of the year; although this is a high percentage; this does evidence that as we move through the year practice concerns are being addressed
- Drift & Delay make up the majority of informal DRPs totally 69% of those issued to Social Work Teams

Formal DRPs:

- Across the year we saw a total of 87 Formal DRPs, this is lower than informal DRPs and evidences our approach or early identification and resolution of practice concerns
- However, similar to Informal DRPs drift and delay remains the highest percentage of DRPs issued at 80% of all formal DRPs
- We have seen an increase in the volume of formal DRPs, last year saw 55 in total for the year. However, we do see a significant reduction in cases being raised at a formal level in Quarters 3 & 4 – this is consistent with the reduction in informal DRPs
- The reduction of DRPs coincides with our wider Workforce Developments in the last 2 quarters of the year with IROs supporting Through Care with Statutory Visits, the implementation of the Long-Term Linked Pod in Through Care, the introduction of Family Support Workers directly in Social Work Teams and ASWPs/CPOs supporting case-holding in Locality
- A learning presentation with key messages from DRPs has been shared at End-to-End Leadership Meeting to distribute learning has been held

Practice Acknowledgements:

- Practice Acknowledgements are the system for Conference Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officer can recognise and formally record on the child's liquid logic record good practice. Over the year 2022/2023 58 have been given.

5. Post-18 Reviews

- Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) statutory involvement with children and young people in care ends on the child's 18th birthday. However, the local authority continues to have responsibilities to young people leaving care until they are 25.
- As part of our 22/23 Business Planning, we developed the IRO Service to offer a Post-18 Review Service to support Care Leavers through key transitions.
- For some young people, their IRO will remain involved to support the young person's transition into the adult world. This will mean the IRO service in Worcestershire working beyond the statutory requirements to support young people that need our help most. The IRO will continue to have oversight of the young person's Pathway Plan and the same IRO will remain allocated to the young person; this is to continue with their pre-established relationship.
- IROs support to young people is to ensure that they receive the services and help they need and which they are entitled to.

Criteria & Needs Assessment:

- In the 12 weeks before a young person turns 18, the IRO will undertake a Post 18 Needs Assessment, this will be a list of key factors the IRO will consider, in consultation with the young person, Social Worker, Personal Advisor and wider network.
- The IRO will consider key vulnerabilities and risks and provide a rational for whether an on-going IRO Service is required.
- This will be recorded by the IRO on the young person's Liquid Logic Record, the Needs Assessment will be a stand-alone form for the IRO to generate and complete, this will include a decision on on-going intervention, the rational for the decision and the consent from the young person.
- Key areas for consideration within the Needs Assessment:
 - Significant Emotional Wellbeing/Mental Health Concerns
 - YP open to Youth Justice and transferring to Probation
 - Concerns about placement / homelessness
 - Young Person assessed to be high risk with Get Safe/Get There
 - Young Person exiting secure / hospital setting within the period
 - Young Person Missing
 - Young Person moving permanently out of area
 - Young Person pregnant

Post 18 Reviews:

- When the IRO is allocated for on-going intervention, the IRO will chair or support the young person to chair a first Post-18 Review for the young person turning 18. The review will consider the most recently completed Pathway Plan.
- The review will follow our strengths-based Signs of Safety Model, structuring discussions between the young person, personal advisor, and key people in the Network using key questions regarding what's working well, what are we worried about and key next steps/what needs to happen.
- The review will make actions on progress/next steps – being clear on what needs to happen, by whom and by when. Each review will take into consideration whether further support/intervention by a Post-18 IRO Service is required and will record whether this is needed, the young person's on-going consent and the rational for the decision.
- This gives a less prescriptive approach to a post-18 support service, but individual to young people and their changing needs and progress made. This may mean some

young people may have 1 review or multiple; following the first review being held at the 3-month point, subsequent post-18 reviews will be undertaken no less than once every six months.

- The review will be recorded in a new stand-alone report that will be generated by the IRO when required, this will be named “Post-18 Review Record”.
- The Post-18 Review will consider key elements of the Pathway Plan and progress for the young person, to include:
 - My Physical Health & Wellbeing
 - My Emotional Health & Wellbeing
 - My Education, Employment and Training
 - Where I am Living
 - Looking after myself and my money
 - My Network – Who is Important to me & who helps me

Outcomes:

- This work went live in August 2022, between then and the end of March 2023, 74 young people had a completed Needs Assessment by the IRO Service.
- In this period 10 young people were assessed as requiring a Post-18 Review – this equates to 13% of young people turning 18 having a further review post their 18th birthday.
- The IRO Service will be reviewing this work in Quarter 1 23/24 in a Practice Meeting to reflect on examples where Post-18 Reviews have happened to look at service learning and next steps in this work.
- Factors identified for young people why a Post-18 Review will be held are:
 - Significant emotional wellbeing/mental health concerns
 - Missing Episodes
 - Concerns about placement/homelessness
 - Young Person pregnant

Leaflet:

We developed and published this leaflet to support our young people to understand the role of a Post-18 Review; available at: [Safeguarding and Quality Assurance | Worcestershire County Council](#)