

Independent Reviewing Service

Report between April 2020-March 2021.



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Introduction

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service has an authoritative role, in assuring the quality of care planning is achieved. The Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance Wales 2004 states this report must identify good practice but must also identify issues for further development, including those where urgent action is required. The guidance urges the Local Authority to make effective use of the reports from its IRO service so that it can be satisfied that its services can achieve best outcomes for the children and young people concerned.

This Independent Reviewing Service report focuses upon the work of the IRO service from April 2020 to March 2021. As part of the service's quality assurance role, the report contains performance information in respect of the statutory reviewing of children who are Looked After, including children with plans for Adoption and Young People with Leaving Care LAC/Pathway Plans (under 18) by Bridgend County Borough Council. It also includes information on children subject of a child protection plan and reviews of these plans at Child Protection Case Conferences.

The report also includes information that relates to regulatory requirements in respect of: resolution case disputes; IRO caseloads; participation and consultation of young people in their Reviews, challenges and achievements in the reporting period and service priorities for 2020-2021.

Legal Context

The appointment of IRO's by Local Authorities is a legal requirement and their core functions are governed by the legal regulatory framework outlined below:

- The Adoption and Children Act 2002 detailed the requirements on Local Authorities in respect of the appointment of IRO's
- The Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance (Wales) 2004
- Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014
- The Children Act 1989
- The Children Act 2004
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002
- The Human Rights Act 1998

- The Review of Children's Cases (Wales) Regulations 2004.
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulation 2015 (Wales)

Core Functions

The Independent Reviewing Service have an important quality assurance function and works towards ensuring all children within the care of Bridgend County Borough Council have a robust effective care plan. This plan is aimed towards improving outcomes for children and young people in providing a stable and secure childhood where their health, education and emotional well-being is promoted through effective care planning. It is the function of the Independent Reviewing Service to ensure the care plan is appropriate and progresses safeguarding for children and young people whilst ensuring all their identified needs are being met.

Independent Reviewing Officers are required to independently review the care plans of all Care Experienced children (CEC) and those children with a Child Protection Plan and subject of the Child Protection Register (CPR). The Review meeting will include consultation with and attendance of relevant agencies (health, education and Police etc) and will usually include the child/young person, their Social Worker, carers and family members. Timescales for Reviews are set out in the Children Act 1989 & part 6 of the Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014, with the first Review taking place within 20 working days, the next Review is held within three months following the initial and then subsequent Reviews are held six months from the second Review. Subsequent Reviews are held every six months unless there has been an unplanned change of placement where a Review must be held within 20 working days.

Within Bridgend County Borough Council, the IRO Service has the following roles and responsibilities:

- The IRO service has a statutory responsibility under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014, Wales Safeguarding Procedures and the IRO Guidance for Chairing all Child Protection Conferences and multi-agency Looked After Children Reviews, including those children placed for Adoption.
- To review and oversee the effectiveness and the appropriateness of Care Plans for those Children and Young People the Council has responsibility for who are subject of a Child Protection Plan and those children and young people within its care.

- The Independent Reviewing Service are responsible for ensuring all Care Experienced Reviews (CER) and Children Protection Conferences take place within compliance as outlined in regulations and to provide a report on each CER to include recommendations as to any changes to the child/young person's Care Plan and to monitor the progress of the Care Plan by tracking cases between Reviews.
- To ensure the child/young person's rights are protected and enhanced.
- To ensure the voice of the child is heard throughout the care planning process and to monitor that the child's wishes and feelings have been recorded and documented throughout the Care Planning process.
- To support and advise through a mentoring and coaching role to social work staff in relation to effective care planning.
- To raise IRO concerns through the agreed Resolution Protocol and to escalate unresolved concerns regarding care planning to the appropriate level of the Local Authority's management structure. To consider the need to seek independent legal advice and possible referral of a case to CAFCASS Cymru. The quality assurance function of the IRO service aims to highlight concerns around specific cases and also any trends relating to care planning practice. It also has a duty to highlight good practice.
- To ensure all care experienced children and young people are subject to Health Plans to promote their health and development. The IRO's have responsibility to ensure the Health Plans are monitored and meeting the children's needs within the Looked After Children Reviewing process.
- All CEC and young people are subject to a Personal Education Plan (PEP). The Social Worker and School are responsible for ensuring this is in place but the child's IRO will ensure they check this and make a recommendation and timescale in the Review should a PEP not be in place.
- Under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014, the role of the IRO has expanded to cover responsibility for the child's case and the not just the Review and this is set out in the IRO Standards.

Composition of the IRO Service

Over the last year, there have been some changes to the composition of the service. The Independent Reviewing Service consists of a full time Team Manager, four full-time and four part-time IRO positions. In this period one part-time IRO has been on maternity leave. The service has experienced higher levels of sick leave compared to the last report and this had a significant impact on IRO caseloads and the use of agency IROs.

The current IRO cohort have a wealth of experience and all have been qualified Social Workers for a substantial period of time. The IRO Service Manager has been in the post since June 2019.

Caseloads and Increased Demands

The average full time IRO caseload is currently between 90–100 cases whilst part-time staff are holding average caseloads of 65. Although the previous report did not raise any concerns about the numbers of cases held by the IRO's in Bridgend, the pressures placed upon the team due to sickness has highlighted the lack of capacity and resilience across the team during these times. In response to these pressures the Service Manager carried out consultation with IRO services across Wales to make comparison of caseloads. The consultation revealed the IROs in neighbouring authorities have an average caseload of 40-70 which is significantly lower than Bridgend.

The Service Manager consulted with IRO Services across Wales and obtained responses from 13 Local Authorities about their caseload numbers. In North Wales they have an average of 75 cases per full time IRO. Two of the 5 Local Authorities were funding an additional 5 IRO roles to reduce caseload numbers.

Only 2 Local Authorities from Mid Wales responded and their caseloads range from 55-64 per full time IRO. In South Wales there is quite a mixed picture with caseloads ranging from 40-100. However, only two other Local Authorities have similar caseload numbers to Bridgend and one of these areas said they were not meeting their statutory duties because of their high numbers.

Since the writing of the previous IRO annual report the IRO Service has been undertaking its duties largely virtually via MS Teams. This has worked well and anecdotally parents and many young people prefer this way of working. As a team we have successfully managed to meet our statutory duties in terms of compliance in both the Care and Child Protection arena.

However, as with many areas within Children's Social Care, we face a number of challenges and increases in workload demands.

The IRO Standards requires the IRO to undertake far greater levels of tracking in between LAC Reviews, this also includes a mid-point review to ensure the recommendations are on-track and to ensure progress is being made and the child's Care Plan continues to reflect their needs. The IROs continue to undertake Quality Assurance documents following every LAC Review or CP Conference, this document requires cross reference against the child's file and is used to identify any outstanding pieces of work or documents to which the SW and Team Manager are alerted.

This tracking and monitoring process requires the IRO to liaise with the SW and often the Team Manager and in some cases other professionals. This is a time consuming piece of work, it requires lengthy reading of the child's file and also recording of the discussions held.

It has been a committed principle of the service to maintain the same IRO wherever possible so that valuable information held by IROs, particularly knowledge of the child's history and family dynamics is not lost. This means that care experienced children have had an element of continuity in their lives, with their IRO often being the only person who has remained consistent for the child through changes of team structures, placements and often their social workers. IRO are now visiting children face to face so need to factor travel time into their week to enable them to do this.

A priority of the IRO Service as set out in the Action Plan is to increase our rates of consultation with children and young people subject to the CPR or being discussed at a Child Protection Conference for the first time. This will also impact on the workload of the conference chairs.

We have seen an increase in the complexity of cases coming through the front door in our Information, Advice and Assistance Service (IAA). This requires more input from the conference chairperson and a greater level of planning and preparation prior to the CP conference.

As a result of the challenges in recruitment and retention in Children's Services, greater demands have been placed on the IRO Service. The combination of changes of Social Worker and the generally lower numbers of Social Workers has required the IROs to undertake more tracking, increased rates of initiating concerns, chasing reports/information, addressing areas of practice.

We have seen an increase in unplanned foster placement breakdowns which requires the IRO to chair an additional LAC Review within 20 working days, this has increased the workload of the IROs considerably.

We are also aware the Public Law Outline (PLO) revised guidance will have an impact on the role of conference chair, and will require much like LAC cases, a greater emphasis on tracking and monitoring in-between conferences.

We continue to meet our statutory responsibilities, however many areas of the IRO service have not had the focus we would like and we recognise that to continue to improve standards across the board, we need to invest in the staff and provide them with the tools and time to undertake their duties to the highest standards. This includes IRO specific training, reflection time, and sufficient time in the working day to undertake meaningful work.

Process Improvement

In this period some changes have been implemented to support the LA`s objectives of reducing the length of time children`s names remain on the CP register.

- Monthly meetings between the IRO Service Manager and the Safeguarding Principal Officer (PO) take place to consider all the children subject of the CPR for more than 18 months.
- IRO Service Manager audits all cases of re-registration when the request for an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) is received and looks at what lessons can be learnt.
- Where IRO`s identify cases at the second Review Child Protection Conference (RCPC) where limited progress has been made, they inform the PO of their concerns. The PO then examines the case and where appropriate arranges a consultation with the Social Worker to consider all options to progress the plan.
- The IRO Service Manager audits all requests for CP conference to consider themes and potential gaps in support services.
- If a conference chair recommends legal advice should be sought, they will inform the PO to raise awareness of the cases being escalated
- The IRO Service is currently recruiting two additional full time IRO posts to address the challenges raised in this report of caseload numbers and this will enable the service to focus more fully on all areas of the IRO role.

Child Protection Register Population.

Children subject to the CPR in this period has continued to fluctuate and the impact of not de-registering any children due to Covid can be seen in the figures. Any children who were de-registered between March - September 2020 was as a result of them either turning 18 or an Interim Care Order being granted. This explains why there was a reduction and subsequent increase in de-registrations in September 2020.

Chart 1

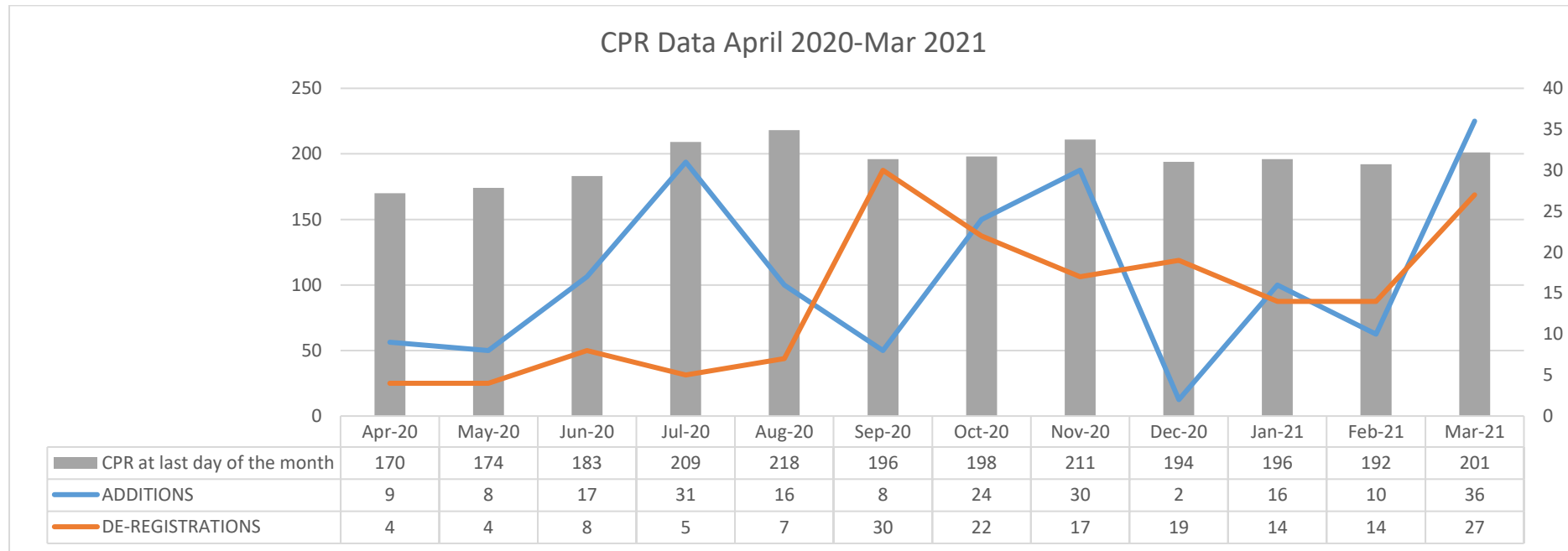


Chart 2

How many initial conferences took place

In Compliance	ICPC April to Mar that were held & if In Compliance												Grand Total	% Held In Compliance
	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21		
No	2	1	1	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	9	95.38%
Yes	9	10	18	25	17	8	20	26	8	11	11	23	186	
Total	11	11	19	29	17	8	20	27	8	11	11	23	195	

The IRO Service held 195 ICPCs in this period. All were held within compliance apart from 9. The reasons for the non-compliance were all due to the IRO Service not receiving the notification from the Childcare and IAA Teams informing the decision had been made to proceed to an ICPC. The IRO Service held all ICPC within 15 working days from the point of receiving the notification that a conference was required.

Chart 3

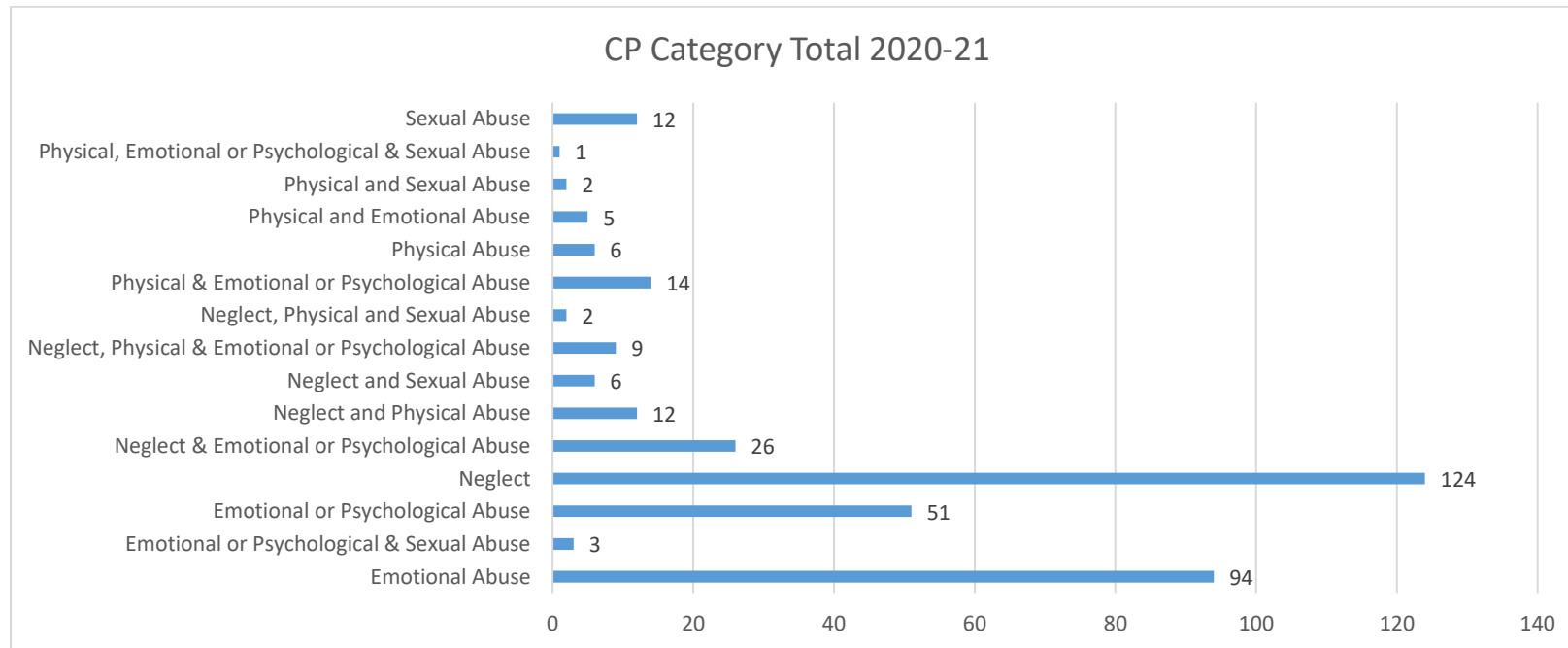
In Compliance	CP Reviews that were held & if In Compliance												Grand Total	% Held In Compliance
	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21		
No	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	99.61%
Yes	39	48	38	39	25	44	50	56	41	57	53	26	516	
Grand Total	39	48	38	39	25	44	50	56	41	58	54	26	518	

The IRO Service held 518 RCPCs and only 2 were out of compliance. The reason for the non-compliance in both cases were as a result of conference being cancelled on the day due to no reports having been completed by the Social Worker and the parents requesting time to read the reports and consult legal advice if they wished. In both of these instances the IROs and or the Child Protection clerks had no availability to reconvene within the compliance date.

Comparing the CPR figures to previous years, less conferences were convened. It is highly likely the Covid pandemic had an impact on these figures as there were less opportunities for children to be seen by professionals and the length of time the schools were shut naturally would result in less referrals.

Chart 4

CPR Categories



As can be seen from chart 4, the greatest number of children were placed on the CPR under the category of Neglect.

In this period we have not had any children registered under the category of Financial Abuse since the introduction of this category.

Neglect

This means a failure to meet a person's basic physical, emotional, social or psychological needs, which is likely to result in an impairment of the person's well-being (for example, an impairment of the person's health).

Physical abuse

Physical abuse means deliberately hurting a child or young person. It includes: physical restraint; such as being tied to a bed, locked in a room, inflicting burns, cutting, slapping, punching, kicking, biting or choking, stabbing or shooting, withholding food or medical attention, drugging, denying sleep, inflicting pain, shaking or hitting babies, fabricating or inducing illness (FII).

Emotional or psychological abuse

This describes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or financial abuse (and includes abuse taking place in any setting, whether in a private dwelling, an institution or any other place).

Sexual abuse

There are 2 different types of child sexual abuse. These are called contact abuse and non-contact abuse. Contact abuse involves: touching activities where an abuser makes physical contact with a child, including penetration. It includes: sexual touching of any part of the body whether the child's wearing clothes or not, rape or penetration by putting an object or body part inside a child's mouth, vagina or anus, forcing or encouraging a child to take part in sexual activity, making a child take their clothes off, touch someone else's genitals or masturbate. Non-contact abuse involves: non-touching activities, such as grooming, exploitation, persuading children to perform sexual acts over the internet and flashing. It includes encouraging a child to watch or hear sexual acts, not taking proper measures to prevent a child being exposed to sexual activities by others, meeting a child following sexual grooming with the intent of abusing them, online abuse including making, viewing or distributing child abuse images allowing someone else to make, view or distribute child abuse images showing pornography to a child sexually exploiting a child for money, power or status (child exploitation)

Financial abuse

Financial abuse includes theft, fraud, pressure about money, misuse of money.

Chart 5
CPR chart showing Gender & Ages

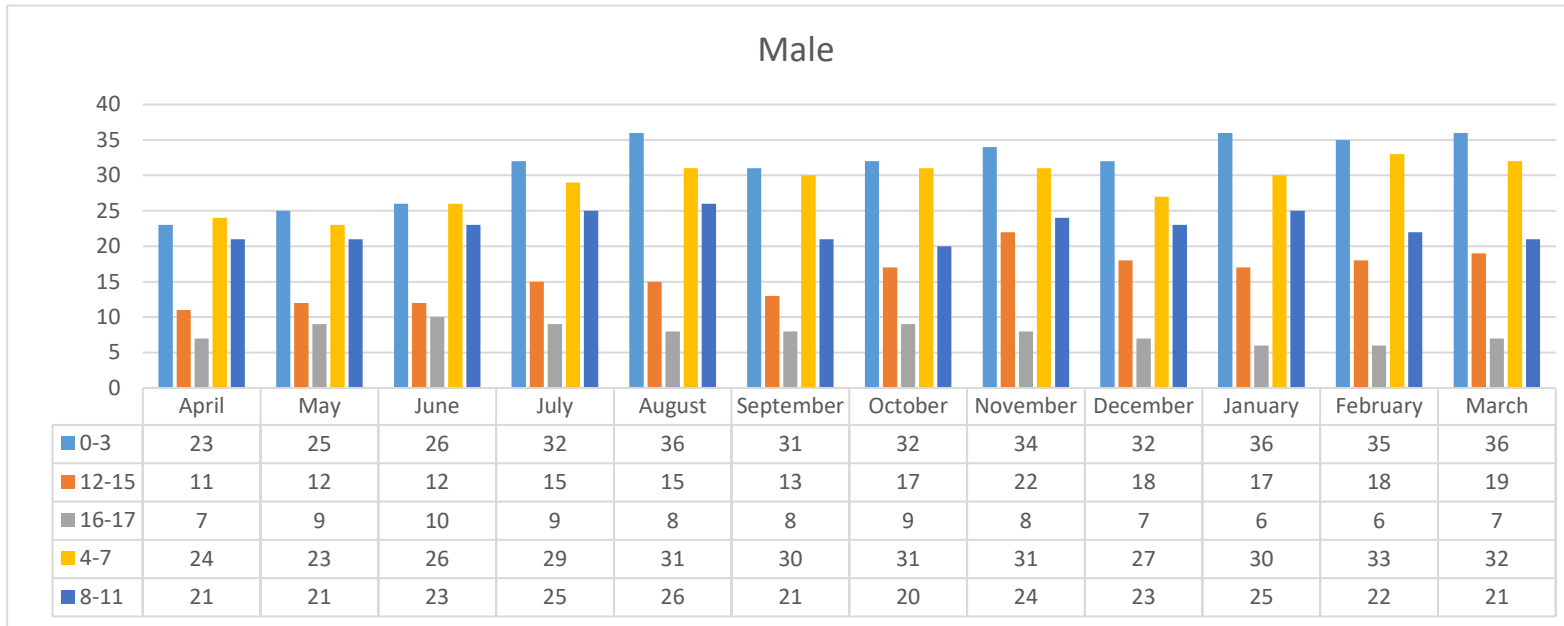


Chart 5 identifies it is male children aged 0-3 years and 4-7 years who are the largest proportion of male children subject to Child Protection registration. The smallest age group is 16-17 yrs. These statistics have not changed from the previous year.

Chart 6 identifies some differences for female children on the CPR, similarly to male children the age group 0-3 and 4-7 feature highly, however, there is a much larger proportion of female children aged 12-15 years subject to the CPR in comparison to male children. The female population is much more evenly distributed in terms of age for females than for males.

Chart 6

CPR chart showing gender and ages

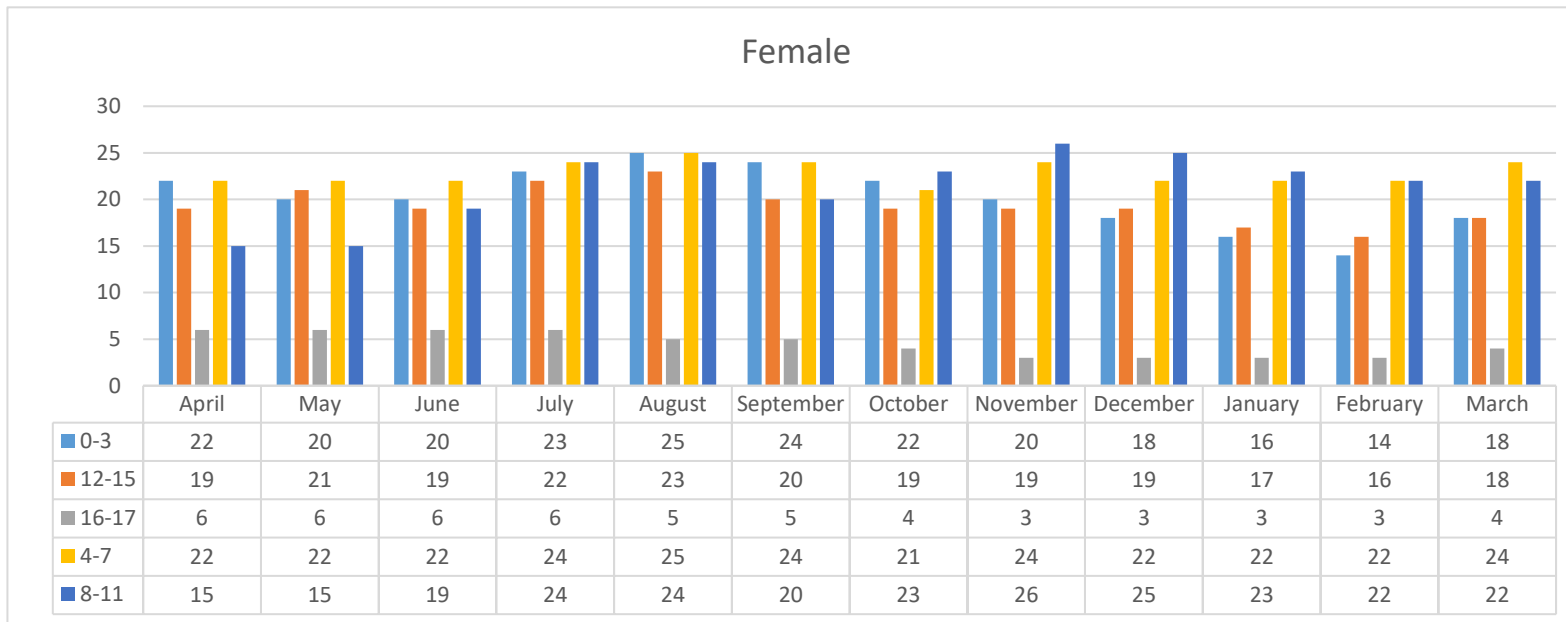


Chart 7 records the number of children being re-registered within a year of de-registration.

Re-registration figures within 12 months of being De-registered

Metric Description	April 2020 - March 2021												Grand Total
	Apr	Ma y	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Ma r	
The number of Children that have been previously registered under any category, at any time during the previous 12 months	0	0	0	1	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	8

Any case that returns to an ICPC within 12 months of being de-registered will be audited by the IRO Service Manager to scrutinise the processes that were followed and consider themes and any lessons that can be learnt.

The child who was re-registered in July was a case of domestic abuse, both parents completed all work with the Local Authority, however disguised compliance was a concern but no evidence to substantiate this. The child was de-registered as there was no evidence of significant harm, however 10 months later there was a further incident of domestic abuse which led to a further period of registration.

The 7 children re-registered in October involved a sibling group of 4 and a sibling group of 3. The risks relating to the sibling group of 4 were physical chastisement, emotional abuse and one child being beyond parental control. The family worked well with services during the initial period of registration but following de-registration one child alleged being physically assaulted by a care giver in the family home. The children were all later accommodated and remain 'looked after' to date.

The risks in the case of the sibling group of 3 was poor home conditions, poor parental mental health, parent's generally feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope. The Social Worker recognised in the second period of registration that there was a pattern of the parents working superficially with support services and no meaningful change had been maintained. During the second period of registration services worked more intensively with the family, and they were monitored for longer. Prior to de-registration services withdrew more slowly and the family were monitored to evidence sustained change while not under the strict scrutiny as at the start of the involvement. This approach appeared to be more successful and the children have since been de-registered. However, I did note the case was closed at the first Care and Support meeting following de-registration and not kept open for the recommended 3 months to ensure sustained change without the scrutiny of a Child Protection plan.

Children subject to the CPR for more than 18 months.

The IRO Service Manager and the Principal Officer (PO) meet on a monthly basis to consider the children who have been subject to the CPR for more than 18 months. The IRO Service Manager completes a comprehensive audit of these cases prior to the meeting and during the meeting actions are agreed to progress these cases. General themes have become apparent from undertaking the audits:

- No stand-alone Child Protection Plans
- Core Group meetings not held within time scales
- No supervision or management oversight
- Delay in making a Court application where the children are safe with family member/s
- Older children cases become 'stuck' with support either not engaged with or not effecting change and professionals unclear about what intervention is required
- Changes in allocated Social Workers creating a delay while the new Social Worker gets to know the case and the family
- Many of these cases are within the Public Law Outline (PLO) process, however the IRO Service has noted there has been a lack of timetabling in this process with many Social Workers not knowing when the next PLO meeting is or when they have to complete assessments by. This should be resolved via the new PLO Review guidance which is much clearer about the objectives of the PLO process and the timetabling of these cases.

The lack of stand-alone child protection plans is a concern. This is the document that sets out the objectives, the expectations on a parent and what will be provided by Children's Services and partner agencies to mitigate the identified risks. This plan should be provided to all parties and discussed, reviewed and amended at the 4-6 weekly Core Group

meetings. Without this plan there is no clear direction and simply put, progress cannot be achieved if nobody is clear about what the objectives are for the child. The IRO Service identifies all cases that do not have a stand-alone Child Protection plan and highlights this to conference and in their Quality Assurance document which informs the Team Manager of the child care team. A request has also been made to the Performance and Development Team to collate the numbers of children subject to CPR without an up to date plan.

The IRO Service Manager held discussions with the ICT and Performance Team to consider ways WCCIS could support the completion of stand-alone plans for example, preventing the user putting a Core Group document on the system without there being a stand-alone and in date Child Protection plan thus preventing the next stage of work while previous work remains incomplete. Unfortunately it has recently been confirmed the system doesn't allow for this currently, but discussions are continuing between the IRO Service Manager, ICT and the Business Support Development Officer to find a way forward, such as utilising the practitioner Dashboards to embed prompts and alerts.

There are currently 25 children (12 families) who have been subject to the CPR for 18 months or more.

One proposal to reduce this number moving forward would be for:

- Team Managers to ensure they discuss these cases in monthly supervision with the Social Worker
- The PO to hold a consultation with the Social Worker and the Team Manager for all cases where children have been subject to the CPR for 12 months
- Team manager to ensure they read the IRO QA document which is completed following all conferences as this will inform them of out of date or missing documents

It is also hoped with the implementation of the Care Experienced Team this will free up Social Workers in the Child Care Teams to undertake their duties towards children subject to the CPR more robustly and progress their plans more effectively.

The IRO Service now has a procedure of informing the PO at the 2nd RCPC (child will have been subject to the CPR for approximately 9 months) if there is risk of drift in the case and or where it is clear the Child Protection Plan isn't effecting positive change and reducing risk. This has been working well and the PO will then ensure he discusses these cases in supervision with the Childcare Team Manager.

Children's participation at Child Protection Review Conferences.

Children's participation at their ICPC and RCPC is hugely important, however it is recognised it may not be appropriate for children or young people to attend any or all of the meetings but there are mechanisms in place to enable them to attend part of the meeting and meet with the chairperson separately. This is an area for improvement in Bridgend as it is only a very small proportion of children and young people who are attending their meetings. The Wales Safeguarding Procedures have placed greater emphasis on the importance of the child's attendance at their conference.

The IRO Service is committed to consulting with young people subject to the Child Protection Register, however this will require greater coordination with the Child Care Teams. Many children subject to the Child Protection Register do not know they are subject to such meetings. The IRO Service Manager has raised this with the Training Department and requested joint training with Social Workers in the Child Care Teams around how they are explaining the Child Protection process to children, advocacy and how we can include them in their Child Protection Conference. IROs are now routinely making contact with the Social Workers to ascertain what the young person's understanding is of their situation and making contact with the young person where appropriate. As detailed earlier, the Performance and Development team were not able to provide data around children's participation in their conferences due to the new forms and difficulties extracting this information. They hope to resolve this issue and provide this data for next year's report.

The Performance and Development Team were not able to provide data around children's participation in their reviews due to the changes in the forms following the Outcomes Model being implemented.

Care Experienced

All children who are placed with Foster Carers are allocated a named IRO on the same day the IRO Service receive the notification from the Childcare Teams.

Care Experienced population

Chart 8

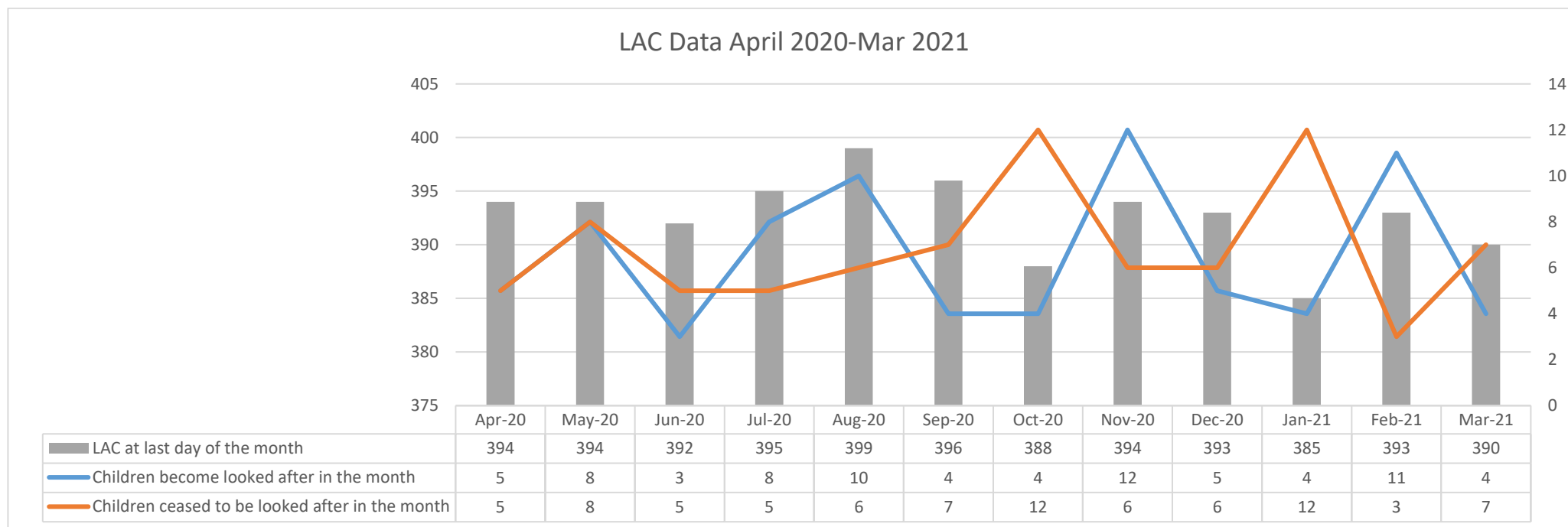


Chart 8 details the number of care admissions and discharges between April 2020-March 2021. Given this period was during the height of the Covid pandemic it is pleasing to see there wasn't a significant fluctuation in the number of children and YP being accommodated by the Local Authority. The monthly average figure in this period was 392 children, in comparison to the previous year there was an increase of 8 children who were looked after.

Chart 9

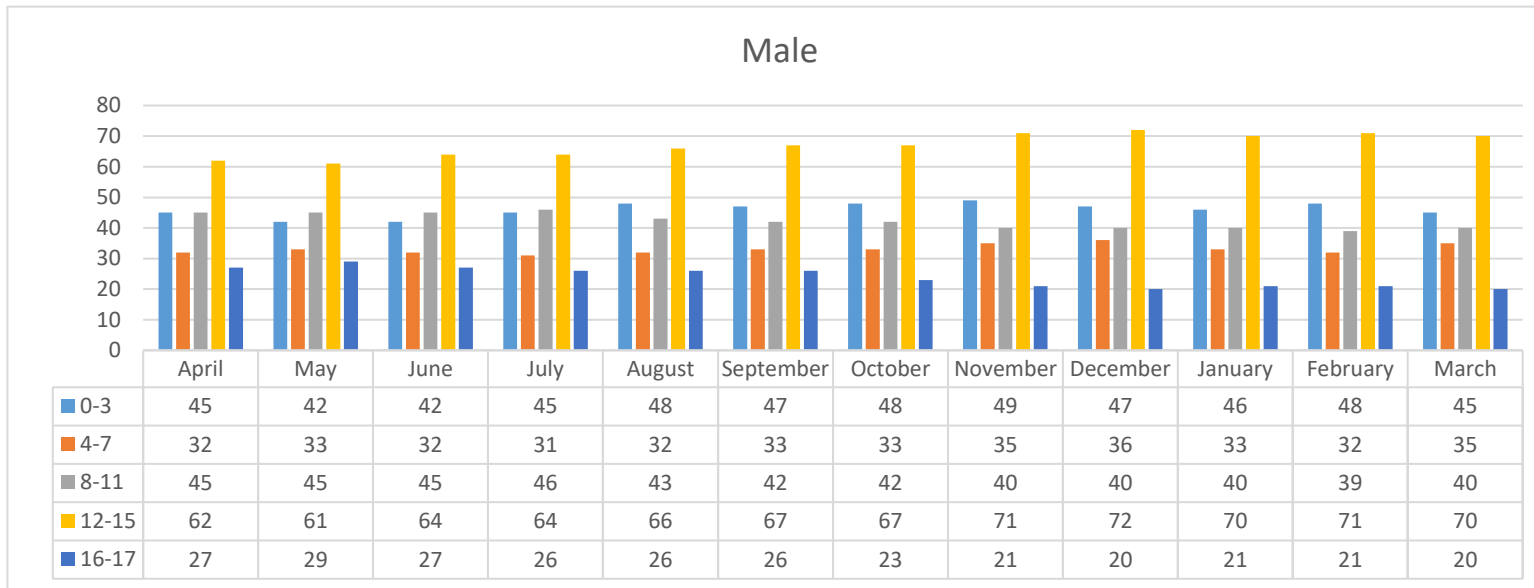
How many LAC reviews took place

In Compliance	April 2020 - March 2021												Grand Total	% Held In Compliance
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar		
No	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	0	0	5	99.57%
Yes	95	82	129	88	89	85	102	124	117	81	41	121	1154	
Total	95	82	129	88	89	85	102	125	119	83	41	121	1159	

As can be seen from the above data, 5 children's reviews were outside of the timescale. One was due to IRO error in calculating the next date and this was subsequently not identified by the LAC clerks. The other 4 were a result of the Social Worker not informing the IRO Service of a significant change in the child's circumstances requiring a LAC Review within 20 working days. Given this period has been during a pandemic resulting in remote working, the compliance figure of 99.57% of LAC reviews being held within compliance is very pleasing. The previous year the figure of out of compliance LAC Reviews was 17 so this is a significant improvement.

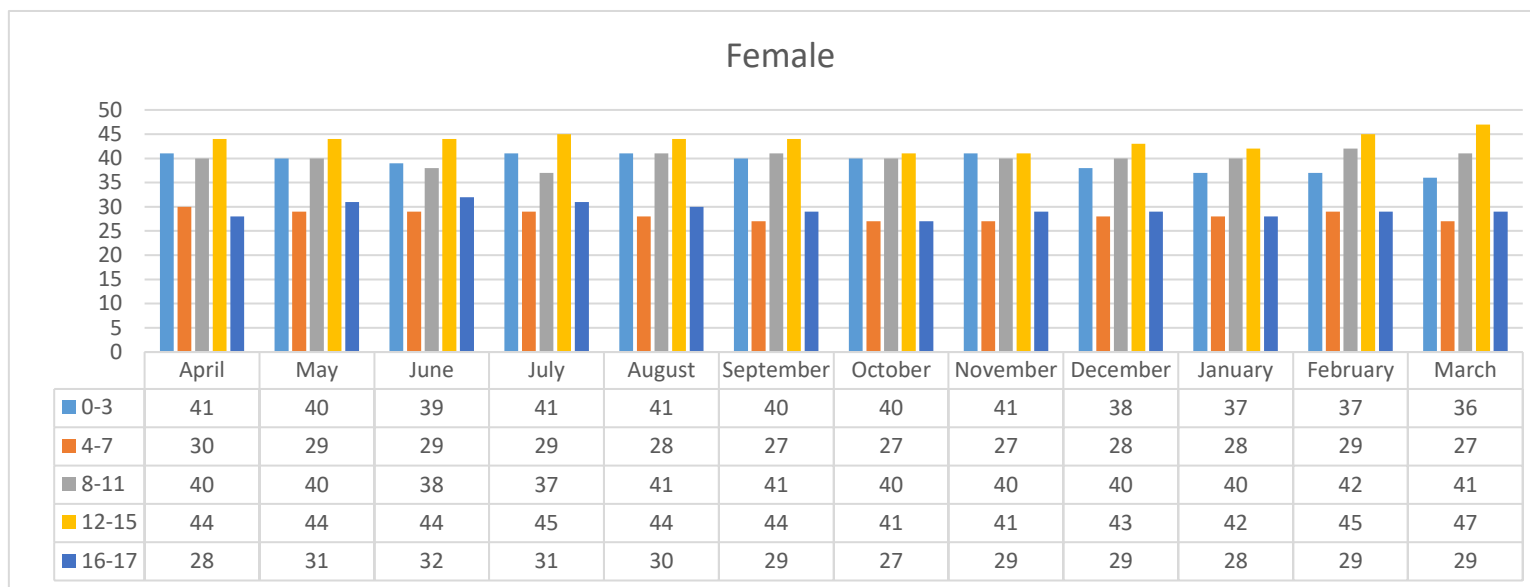
Chart 10

Care Experienced Children Male and Age.



As can be seen from chart 10 for male CEC, the greatest age group continues to be 12-15 years. This data set replicates last year's data.

Chart 11



As can be seen above, the female population mimics the male population in terms of age figures, with 12-15 being the highest. However, for female CEC there is less disparity then between the other age groupings.

Advocacy.

In the period of Apr-Sept 2020 a total of 135 referrals were made to Tros Gynnal Plant Advocacy Service for ongoing advocacy support. Of the 135 referrals, 72 were in respect of CEC, 47 children subject to child protection, 14 Care and Support and 2 Care Leavers. This is an overall reduction from the previous year of 203 referrals, however this was to be expected given children were seen less during the lockdown periods, they were not in schools and Social Work visits were less frequent. Some children may have also refused advocacy support during this time as the support was provided via virtual platforms and they may not have wanted to engage in this way.

Some positive feedback was received from young people about the advocacy support they received including:

“I have someone who will speak to people about my feelings and opinions”

“It’s good to tell my Social worker how I am feeling”

It remains a priority for the IRO Service to ensure all children involved in the child protection process or care experienced children have the opportunity to access advocacy support. The IRO’s ensure they discuss this when they consult with children and young people. They raise the issue of advocacy at all meetings and record advocacy numbers in the quality assurance audits. The IRO’s ensure every child or young person receives an Active Offer for Advocacy services. The Active Offer ensures the Social Worker has explained what Advocacy is and how it can support them. Children and young people who become looked after and/ or are being discussed at a Child Protection Conference are entitled to receive an Active Offer of advocacy support. However, the Active Offer should be consistently and regularly revisited with children and young people.

Business Support.

Business Support have continued to support the core functions of the IRO Service during this period and have done so by adapting to new ways of working due to Covid restrictions. The IRO Service and Business Support have a quarterly interface meeting to address any challenges and monitor any issues of compliance.

Team Meetings

During this period and as a result of the pandemic some meetings with external agencies have been placed on hold, however the IRO has had monthly interface meetings with Western Bay Adoption Service and monthly quality assurance meetings with partners in Cwm Taff Morgannwg. Once restrictions allow for face to face meetings to resume the IRO will meet on a quarterly basis with CAFCASS Cymru We would usually plan for the Head of Service to attend the IRO Service Team Meetings on a quarterly basis but during the pandemic this has not been achievable at this frequency.

Case Dispute Resolution and Complaints

In this period the IRO’s monitored 1 case under the IRO resolution protocol. One case relates to a child residing under PWP regulations and the concerns are around drift and a lack of assessment. This case has since been resolved and the IRO protocol has ended.

There were no complaints in relation to Child Protection Conferences that required resolution via an independent panel.

Changes were made to the electronic consultation document and it was hoped the process was more user friendly ensuring children and young people are engaging in their reviews and their voices are being heard throughout the care planning

process. The IRO Service Manager has worked with the Fostering Team to consider ways foster carers would assist in children completing consultations questionnaires more frequently. The Fostering Team now discuss this during supervision with their carers to ensure it stays on the agenda and is encouraged.

IRO Quality Assurance Audit

The IRO's complete quality assurance audits after every LAC Review and CP Conference. The quality assurance audit form provides data on practice standards and captures data and information relating to the IRO standards. Once completed by the IRO following the meeting, the form automatically goes to the Safeguarding Team Manager of the case holding team for their scrutiny and management oversight. This form also alerts the Safeguarding Team Manager to any outstanding pieces of work, compliance issues and identifies areas of good practice and this has continued during this period.

In this period the IRO Service Manager has been involved in facilitating training to Social Workers and partner agencies on the Wales Safeguarding Procedures. This has involved facilitating sections of the training around Conferences, Core Groups and major changes from the All Wales Child Protection Procedures.

The IRO Service Manager also sits on the Cwm Taf Morgannwg Quality and Performance sub-group. This group undertakes audits and seeks to identify themes, learning and improve practice. In this period a Domestic Abuse audit was undertaken and at our next meetings we will share the learning from this. The shared learning event has been delayed due to the Covid pandemic.

IRO Standards

The IRO guidance and practice standards were introduced at the beginning of 2019 by the Association for Fostering and Adoption (AFA) Cymru funded by Welsh Government. On behalf of the Ministerial Advisory Group for Improving Outcomes for Children. IRO's have worked to improve tracking and monitoring as advised within the Practice Standards and Good Practice Guide. Arrangements for Independent legal advice for IRO's have been agreed with a reciprocal arrangement between Bridgend and Neath Port Talbot legal departments. The IRO's have accessed this support on a number of occasions. However, the standards have introduced a new process to completing CERs which includes the involvement of the Team Managers. This is achieved when the IRO sends the Team Manager the meeting recommendations within 5 days of completing the Review and that Team Manager has 5 days to respond to these recommendations. This is now embedded and working well within the service quickly identifying any area of disagreement and enabling these issues to be resolved at the earliest stage. IROs are holding mid-point meetings with the allocated Social Worker and this is also supporting the identification of drift early.

Challenges

Consultation with children and young people needs to be improved to ensure their voice is being heard. Whilst the IRO's have worked to improve the consultation document for children and young people, challenges remain in encouraging them to complete the document. It is a priority for the IRO Service to develop creative ways of engaging and encouraging participation of all children and young people. The development of an App has been placed on hold due to the Covid pandemic.

Some young people have informed their IRO that they prefer consultation via a virtual platform and now these systems are in place moving forward the IRO's will be able to give greater choice to children about how they discuss their wishes and feelings.

CAFCASS Cymru

The IRO service has a direct relationship with CAFCASS Cymru and can, if required, refer matters of concern or report directly to CAFCASS Cymru where deficits in care planning for care experienced young people cannot be resolved locally but are sufficiently significant as to impact on the outcomes for children and young people. To date, the IRO service has had no cause to refer to CAFCASS Cymru but liaises with them regularly on individual cases within the public law arena. IROs in Bridgend work to a standard that has improved liaison between the CAFCASS Cymru children's guardians and Safeguarding Social Workers within family proceedings. As a result, IROs are alerted more quickly to issues arising in the court process and can liaise at an earlier stage where disputes arise with the Local Authority. This relationship enables the means to communicate issues arising directly with the IRO that are relevant to the on-going development and monitoring of a care plan, either during proceedings or following an order being granted. A CAFCASS Cymru IRO event is planned for February 2022 to support the strengthening of relationships and further develop our processes for improved collaborative working.

Service Priorities

- To increase the contact between the IRO with children and young people.
- To work alongside safeguarding colleagues to achieve permanency for all children and reduce the numbers of care experienced children within a safe and appropriate plan.
- The development of child consultation and participation through a more accessible medium.
- To work alongside Safeguarding Teams and SCWDP to improve practice around Looked After Children Reviews and the Care Planning Process.
- To ensure appropriate care plans are progressing in a timely manner to prevent and avoid drift in children's cases.

- To continue to focus on increasing participation of children and young people at their meetings.
- To ensure every care experienced child and young person has a stand-alone and in date Care Plan.
- To collate thematic practice issues identified from the QA's and use these to develop learning themes and improve practice
- IROs will continue to promote advocacy services and the active offer to children and young people and make these referrals where consent has been given to support the child/young person's voice.

Please see below service priorities Action Plan

B	Completed
R	A problem needs serious attention and action now
A	Issues are being managed and if addressed should not affect delivery
G	On track, in progress, any minor risks/ issues being managed
NYS	Not Yet Started

Independent Reviewing Service Action Plan 2021/2022

IRO Service								
	Owner	Due date	Recommendation	Action	Evidence	Update	Last RAG	RAG
1	IRO Service Manager and each IRO.	Sept 2021	To increase the contact between the IRO with children and young people.	IRO Service Manager will continue to be involved in the progress of the MUSE App.	IRO Service Manager will attend all consultation meetings in relation to the development of this APP.	Due to the Covid pandemic work focussing on a consultation APP ceased and is yet to be restarted. However, progress has been noted in terms of	Amber	Amber

				Each IRO will ensure they give the child/YP the opportunity to meet with them to discuss their LAC review or CP Conference.	Data collection of consultation rates will be included in the 6 monthly IRO Report.	<p>IRO consultation with young people and this is felt to be as a result of virtual platforms being preferred by many children and teenagers.</p> <p>Low rates of consultation documents. Service Manager has liaised with the Fostering Team to ask Foster Carers to encourage the children in their care to complete the consultation form. The Fostering Team have made it a standing point of discussion at their Foster Carers supervision, however, we have yet to see an improvement in the return rates.</p>		
2.	IRO Service Manager and each IRO.	Sept 2021	To work alongside safeguarding colleagues to achieve permanency for all children and reduce the numbers of care experienced children within a safe and appropriate plan.	IROs to check at the 2 nd LAC Review the plan for the child is clear. If the plan isn't clear, the IRO will track the case and inform the appropriate Safeguarding Team Manager.	<p>IRO Service Manager to attend the LAC reduction Strategy Meeting held on a bi-monthly basis.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager will identify any children who may be suitable for</p>	<p>This process is currently working well. IRO Service Manager has identified a number of cases where alternative care options could be considered resulting in the child no longer being Looked After.</p> <p>In IRO Supervision the IRO Team Manager ensures discussion takes place around the children</p>	Green	Green

				<p>IROs to ensure they consider all appropriate options for care experienced children such as SGOs.</p>	<p>alternative Orders and will discuss this with the allocated IRO.</p>	<p>who have been identified as possible candidates for an alternative Order such as a Special Guardianship Order which would end their LAC status. The IRO Service Manager attends the bi-monthly LAC Reduction Strategy meetings and provides updates.</p> <p>Cases where there isn't a permanency plan at the second review are due to care proceedings not being finalised.</p>		
3.	IRO Service Manager	Sept 2021	<p>The development of child and young persons consultation and participation through a more accessible medium.</p>	<p>IRO Service Manager will continue to be involved in the progress of the MUSE APP.</p> <p>Each IRO will ensure they give the child/YP the opportunity to meet with them to discuss their LAC review or CP Conference.</p>	<p>IRO Service Manager will attend all consultation meetings in relation to the development of this APP.</p> <p>Data collection of consultation rates will be included in the 6 monthly IRO Report.</p>	<p>Due to the Covid pandemic work focussing on a consultation APP ceased and is yet to be restarted.</p> <p>However, progress has been noted in terms of IRO consultation with young people and this is felt to be as a result of virtual platforms being preferred by many children and teenagers.</p> <p>Low rates of consultation documents. Service Manager has liaised with the Fostering Team to ask</p>	NYS	NYS

						Foster Carers to encourage the children in their care to complete the consultation form. The Fostering Team have made it a standing point of discussion at their Foster Carers supervision, however, we have yet to see an improvement in the return rates.		
4.	IRO Service Manager and each IRO.	Sept 2021	To work alongside Safeguarding Teams and SCWDP to improve practice around care experienced children and their meetings.	<p>IROs will ensure they complete the IRO Quality Assurance document following every LAC Review. This will automatically be sent to the Safeguarding Team Manager for their scrutiny.</p> <p>Should the IRO identify concerning practice, they will raise this with the IRO Service Manager and the Safeguarding Team Manager. They will track the progress to a resolution and initiate the IRO</p>	The rates of completed QA forms will increase in the next year and the data will be included in the IRO 6 month report. IRO Service Manager will attend all IRO protocol Meetings to support the IROs and facilitate resolution.	<p>IRO Service Manager continues to raise cases of concern with the individual Social Workers, their Team Managers and the PO where appropriate.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager continues to present training alongside the training department and is facilitating introductory sessions to new starters and newly qualified staff.</p>	Green	Green

				<p>Protocol where necessary.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager will facilitate training alongside the Training Department to support and improve practice.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager will facilitate induction sessions to new starters and newly qualified Social Workers to support their professional development.</p>				
5.	IRO Service Manager and each IRO.	Sept 2021	To ensure appropriate care plans are progressing in a timely manner to prevent and avoid drift in children's cases.	At every LAC Review the IRO will check the child has a Care Plan that is up to date and meets the child's needs. The IRO will recommend at each LAC Review that the Care Plan is updated to reflect the changes agreed at the	<p>The rates of IRO Quality Assurance forms being completed is increasing and this will continue moving forward.</p> <p>IROs are holding mid-point meetings for each child who is Looked After, however, there are times the child's SW does</p>	In this period the IROs identified all children whose Care Plan was out of date and informed the respective Social Workers and Team Managers and provided a timescale for completion. On the whole progress was made but not in every case. IROs will continue to monitor all children's Care Plans and where there is a Care Plan that is out of date or not reflective of the child's circumstances they will	Amber	Green

				<p>current LAC Review.</p> <p>The IRO will track each child and ensure their Care Plan has been updated. The IRO will hold mid-point meetings to prevent drift and take action where drift is identified.</p> <p>Each IRO will complete the IRO Quality Assurance form following each LAC review as this informs the SW and their Team Manager of any out of date Care Plans.</p>	<p>not respond. In these cases the IRO will raise this with their Service Manager and the safeguarding Team Manager.</p>	<p>raise this appropriately and track to ensure completion.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager ensures when attending the LAC Reduction Strategy meeting and monthly Performance meeting that for any child who is discussed, the date of their Care Plan is checked to ensure it is up to date and where not it is flagged with the Safeguarding Team Manager.</p>		
6.	IRO Service Manager and each IRO.	Sept 2021	To continue to focus on increasing consultation and participation of children and young people at Looked After Children Reviews.	<p>IROs to ensure they offer to consult with each LAC child as appropriate for their age and level of understanding and to use a means of communication that the child</p>	<p>The IRO Quality Assurance form captures the consultation data and this will be included in IRO 6 month report.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager will during</p>	<p>Since Covid restrictions have been in place IROs have found many young people prefer to be consulted via virtual means such as Skype.</p> <p>IROs report many young people have attended their LAC reviews while in the lock down period as they</p>	N/A	Amber

				<p>choses. This includes face to face meeting, phone, Skype and MS Teams.</p>	<p>supervision sessions discuss the importance of consultation and ensure it remains a priority for each IRO.</p>	<p>have had greater availability to attend.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager has added consultation as a supervision agenda item to ensure it is discussed in supervision sessions with each IRO.</p>		
7.	IRO Service Manager and each IRO.	Sept 2021	<p>To ensure every care experienced child and young person has a stand-alone and in date Care Plan.</p>	<p>At every LAC Review the IRO will check the child has a Care Plan that is up to date and meets the child's needs. The IRO will recommend at each LAC Review that the Care Plan is updated to reflect the changes agreed at the current LAC Review.</p> <p>The IRO will track each child and ensure their Care Plan has been updated. The IRO will hold mid-point meetings to prevent drift and take action where drift is identified.</p>	<p>The rates of IRO Quality Assurance forms being completed is increasing and this will continue moving forward.</p> <p>IROs are holding mid-point meetings for each child who is Looked After, however, there are times the child's SW does not respond. In these cases the IRO will raise this with their Team Manager and the safeguarding Team Manager.</p>	<p>In this period the IROs identified all children whose Care Plan was out of date and informed the respective Social Workers and Team Managers and provided a timescale for completion. On the whole progress was made but not in every case. IROs will continue to monitor all children's Care Plans and where there is a Care Plan that is out of date or not reflective of the child's circumstances they will raise this appropriately and track to ensure completion.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager ensures when attending the LAC Reduction Strategy meeting and monthly Performance meeting that for any child who is discussed, the date</p>	Amber	Green

				Each IRO will complete the IRO Quality Assurance form following each LAC review as this informs the SW and their Team Manager of any out of date Care Plans.		of their Care Plan is checked to ensure it is up to date and where not that this is flagged with the Safeguarding Team Manager.		
8.	IRO Service Manager and each IRO	Sept 2021	To collate thematic practice issues identified from the QA's and use these to develop learning themes and improve practice.	The data will be scrutinised for the 6 monthly IRO Report.	Any practice themes identified will be provided to the Training Department and Team Managers at the weekly Team Meeting. If required the IRO Service Manager will be available to support the Training Team in facilitating training sessions to address these deficits.	The Quality Assurance forms are being used currently to identify out of date Care Plans as a theme and this is being addressed by the IROs with the Social Workers and their Team Managers.	NYS	Green
9.	IRO Service Manager and each IRO.	Sept 2021	IROs will continue to make children and young people aware of the advocacy service.	This is currently monitored via the IRO Quality Assurance form and will be scrutinised for the	The referral numbers to Tros Gynnal from Bridgend are the highest in the Western Bay area.	Advocacy referral rates continue to be pleasing with 135 children having been referred in this period.	Green	Green

				<p>IRO 6 month report.</p> <p>IROs will ensure when consulting with young people they ask if they would like the support of the Advocacy Service.</p> <p>IRO Service Manager will liaise with the Group Manager for Case Management and Transition periodically to check the referral rates have not decreased.</p>	<p>IROs report good evidence of advocacy discussions and offers being made between Social Workers and Children.</p>			
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