

Annual Report

Independent Reviewing Officer Service

April 2024 - March 2025

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Introduction

The IRO Handbook 2010 provides statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for children in our care.

It seeks to improve outcomes for children in our care by providing guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct statutory responsibilities. It also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in delivering an effective IRO service. The aim is to give all children in our care the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential.

As part of this statutory guidance there is a requirement for the manager of the IRO service to produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board.

This North East Lincolnshire (NEL) Council Annual Report - Independent Reviewing Officer Service 2024/25 outlines the legal context and provides an overview of the IRO role and responsibilities. It also provides an update on the IRO service recommendations for 2024/25. To set the annual report into context, it summarises the NEL children in our care population as at the end of March 2025 in comparison to the end of March 2024.

This annual report also covers the areas of focus required by the IRO Handbook as follows:

- The development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make-up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving
- Timeliness of reviews, monitoring and quality assurance
- Children's participation in reviews
- Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes
- Good practice and issues for further development

The report concludes with the IRO service recommendations for 2025/26.

Legal context

IROs were introduced on a statutory basis in 2004 and the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 created a new power for the Secretary of State to issue statutory guidance to IROs. The IRO Handbook 2010 is the latest statutory guidance for IROs and should be read in conjunction with the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.

The role and responsibilities of the IRO are defined in statute and it is a legal requirement under section 26 of the 1989 Children Act (as amended by the Adoption and Children Act 2002), for an IRO to be appointed to participate in case reviews, monitor the local authority's performance in respect of reviews, and to consider whether it would be appropriate to refer to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass).

The IRO's primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. To be successful, the role must be valued by senior managers and operate within a supportive service culture and environment. An effective IRO service should enable the local authority to achieve improved outcomes for children.

Overview of the IRO role and responsibilities

Understanding the role and functions of the IRO requires an understanding of the centrality of effective care planning and review to good social work practice for children in our care, as well as the duties of the local authority in relation to care planning and review, as set out in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.

Care planning and reviews are about bringing together children who are in care, their families, carers and professionals, in order to plan for the care of the child and to review that plan on a regular basis.

The review of the care plan is one of the key components within the core processes of working with children and families of: assessment, planning, intervention and reviewing. It is the responsibility of the IRO to chair such reviews at regular intervals.

IROs are therefore well placed to assess the quality and effectiveness of local authority planning and support for children in our care. The IRO has a crucial role to play in ensuring that the local authority fulfils its responsibilities as a 'corporate parent' for all the children that are in care. The IRO should ensure that the child is offered stable care that is sensitive and appropriate to their needs so that the child is able to flourish and achieve. The plan for each child must demonstrate how the services provided have fully taken account of the child's wishes and feelings.

The statutory duties of the IRO are to:

- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case
- participate in any review of the child's case
- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority
- 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 that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child. As corporate parents each local authority should act for the children in their care as a responsible and conscientious parent would act.

There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of the IRO:

- chairing the child's review
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis

The IRO must ensure that the child's current wishes and feelings have been established and taken into account in both of these aspects.

As part of the monitoring function, the IRO has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. This should include identifying patterns of concern emerging not just around individual children but also more generally in relation to the collective experience of its children in our care of the services they receive. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice.

In discharging these duties, the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities:

- promoting the voice of the child – including making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one
- ensuring that plans for children in our care are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs
- offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for children in our care and the delivery of services to them
- monitoring the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands the implications of any changes made to his/her care plan

Progress of IRO service recommendations for 2024/25

Recommendation for 2024/25	Progress as at end of March 2025
1. Further develop the electronic case management system to enable reporting on timescales for recording and distribution of review meeting records	<p>The review meeting record forms used in the electronic case management system (Liquid Logic) have been re-developed in conjunction with new care plan forms. This has been an extensive and complicated piece of work undertaken with the ICT service.</p> <p>As at 31/03/25 there were final adjustments being made to the system to ensure that the forms have full functionality. This system change work will enable reporting on timescales for recording and distribution of review meeting records from Spring 2025/26</p>
2. Further development of tracking children's permanence plans, including increased oversight for specific groups of children such as children that need long-term matching to their foster carers, children who are placed with parents and the discharge of care orders and children who are returning to living within their wider family network through kinship care arrangements	<p>A Permanence Tracker (as a Power BI report) has been developed that enables oversight of the permanence plans for all children in our care, whether this plan has been achieved and the latest permanence position. This has enabled full oversight of the permanence of children in our care.</p> <p>A monthly Permanence Assurance meeting has been established, attended by the IRO Service Manager. This has increased oversight for the permanence of all children in our care and has strengthened the progression of children's permanence plans.</p> <p>A bespoke Placement with Parents and Special Guardianship Order meeting has also been developed and is held twice monthly to track the progress of assessments, reunification of children with their parents/wider family network, the progress of court applications including the discharge of Care Orders and the granting of Special Guardianship/other Orders.</p> <p>A Long-Term Matching panel has been in place during the year to fast-track assessments for children who were waiting to be long-term matched with their foster carers and agency decision-maker approval. The impact of the panel has been that a further 66 children have been</p>

	<p>long-term matched with their foster carers. Due to this being a successful initiative a new process is planned from April 2025 on case-by-case basis.</p>
<p>3. IROs to improve the quality and impact of their case tracking so that review decisions are put into action in a timely manner and children's permanence plans are progressed until permanence is achieved</p>	<p>Through the development of a case tracking practice standard that is overseen on a monthly basis and during bi-monthly IRO supervision, the Service Manager monitors consistency of IROs case tracking.</p> <p>IRO case tracking practice and its quality is overseen through monthly audits as part of the Children's Services Audit Framework. IRO monthly practice development meetings have been enhanced during the year which include live peer auditing of case tracking and review records, including pre-review consultations and dispute resolution records. In addition, the Service Manager and Deputy Service Director undertake monthly dip sampling with feedback of the findings for practice improvement into the IRO Practice Development meeting.</p> <p>There is good evidence of improved quality and impact of case tracking including collaborative work between IROs and social workers to progress children's care plans. This continues to be an area of further development for the IRO service.</p>
<p>4. IROs to improve the quality and impact of their pre-review consultations and better support children's attendance at/or contribution to their reviews so that children can share their views and influence their plans, including through the support of an advocate</p>	<p>IRO pre-review consultations are reported on within a Power BI dashboard that is monitored by IROs and the Service Manager for compliance on a daily to weekly basis.</p> <p>There is live peer auditing of pre-review consultations during the IRO monthly practice development meetings and monthly dip sampling as indicated in 3. above. There has been an improvement of children attending their reviews and children's participation within the review process remains high.</p> <p>From auditing and dip sampling there is some evidence that advocacy is discussed when holding pre-review consultations also that advocates are involved with children in our care through the reviewing process when needed. Further development is required within the wider context of developing our local advocacy offer.</p> <p>During early 2025 joint work began with the Voice and Influence Lead Officer and children/young people's Our Voice Listen Up group to enhance IROs relational practice including pre-review consultation practice and processes.</p> <p>The IROs are looking forward to the feedback from the Our Voice Listen Up group and responding with further development for the IRO service.</p>
<p>5. Further develop IROs writing 'to' instead of 'about' children within review records and seek feedback from children on their views of this</p>	<p>The IROs have been complimented by professionals for writing 'to' instead of 'about' children. IROs will continue to embed this style of writing and be influenced by children's feedback to further enhance their recording.</p>
<p>6. Further develop a child-centred and relational approach to holding review meetings</p>	<p>During early 2025 there has been joint work with the Voice and Influence Lead Officer and children/young people's Our Voice Listen Up group to develop the relational approach to the reviewing process and meetings as referred to in 4. above. The IRO service has taken part in relational practice learning and development through sessions with Mark Finnis of L30 restorative systems. As a result, relationship-based practice has been a focus and is developing. Pre-review</p>

	consultations with children and young people are improving in their quality, listening and including children's individual wishes and feelings. Refreshments are offered at reviews held in office bases. Discussions have been held about holding reviews as a series of meetings so that the part that children/young people are involved in is more focused on them.
7. Strengthen the IROs monthly practice development meetings to include live auditing of review records, case tracking and dispute resolution to further improve their reviewing and monitoring practice	See 3. and 4. above.
8. Review, refresh and continue to deliver workshops to the Children's Services workforce on the reviewing process	Monthly workshops have continued to be delivered by IRO's and these have now been incorporated into Academy NEL. Therefore reporting on courses and attendees will be available from 2025/26. New approaches to encourage further attendance are being developed for 2025/26 through new practitioners' induction, bespoke training for foster carers and IROs attending existing practice development forums such as lunch and learn sessions.
9. Review the IRO service structure and roles to ensure that there continues to be sufficient capacity for an effective IRO service	This has been undertaken and implemented.

Summary of the NEL children in our care population

The figures for 2024/25 or as at 31/03/25 are predicted figures until fully validated through the statistical returns to government. The comparator data for statistical neighbours (SN), England and Yorkshire and Humber (Y&H) is that which is the latest published data for 2023/24.

During 2024/25 the children in our care population has continued to decrease due to more consistent, robust and effective decision making and joined up approaches to care planning and reviewing across services to identify the right plan at the right time for our children.

Children in our care as at the year end

As at 31/03/25 there were 438 children in our care which is a decrease of 7% since 31/03/24 when there were 469 children in our care. The NEL rate of 132 per 10,000 population remains higher than the comparators with SNs having a rate of 100, England at 70 and Yorkshire Y&H at 80.

Looking at the age groups of children in our care at the year end, the largest group of children are aged 10-15 years old which is in line with comparators. NEL does have higher volumes of children aged 5-9 years old than comparators and a lower proportion of children aged 16 years and over in our care than comparators.

There are 2% of children in our care who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This has reduced from 3% the previous year and contrasts with SN and regional comparators who have seen an increase at 7% for both, whilst the England average has remained the same at 9%.

The gender of children in our care during 2023/24 and 2024/25 were almost identical. During 2024/25, 53% of the children were male and 47% were female and this was 54% and 46% respectively in 2023/24. During 2024/25 there were 91% of children in our care that had ethnicities that were White and 9% who had other ethnicities.

Placement types

There were 74% of children in our care at 31/03/25 who were living in foster care. This has decreased slightly from 76% at the end of the previous year. NEL are performing better than comparators on children placed in foster care with SN at 68%, England at 67% and Y&H at 70%.

There were 40 children (9.1% of children in our care) who were placed with parents at the year-end which is an increase from 33 at the end of last year and a higher proportion of children than comparators (SN 7%, England 6%, Y&H 7%).

Placement providers and location

There was 54% of children who were placed in our own provision at the year-end which is the same as in 2023/24. This remains above comparators (SN 50%, England 43%, Y&H 46%).

There was 29% of children who were placed in independent/private provision at the year-end which is a decrease from the previous year which was 32%. This remains better than comparators with SN having 37%, England 37% and Y&H 31% in independent/private provision.

There was 26% of children in our care who were placed over 20 miles from home at the year-end which has remained in line with the previous year at 25% and remains above comparators (SN 12%, England 17%, Y&H 16%)

Placement stability

After a period of instability for our children in our care, NEL has seen this stabilise over the last year with:

- 6% of children having had 3 or more placement moves within the year, which is a decrease from 8% last year. NEL is below the latest published comparator rates (SN 10%, England 10%, Y&H 11%)
- 59% of children aged under 16 have been in the same placement for two years or more which is a decrease from last year's 71% but has been affected by the number of children leaving care to permanence. This is below comparators (SN 66%, England 68%, Y&H 69%)

Legal status

There was 73% of children in our care at the year-end who were subject of care orders which is higher than comparators (England 57%, SN 58%, Y&H 61%). There was 7% of children who were accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, which is lower than comparators (England 19%, SN 15%, Y&H 14%).

Children entering our care

There were 95 children who entered our care during 2024/25 which is a slight reduction on children who entered our care the previous year where the number was 100. This gives an annual rate of 29 children per 10,000 population which is below the SN rate of 40, and in line with the England rate of 28 and Y&H regional average of 30. Of children entering our care:

- 25% were aged under 1, compared with the SN rate of 21%, England average of 16% and Y&H of 20%
- 14% were aged 16+ years of age which is much lower than comparators (SN 20%, England 29%, Y&H 21%)

Children leaving our care

There were 123 children who ceased to be in our care during 2024/25 which has reduced from the previous year where the number was 207. Of these:

- 25 children were adopted during 2024/25 which accounted for 20% of all children leaving care
- 28 children left care due to Special Guardianship Orders being granted which accounted for 23% of all children leaving care
- 22 children left care due to Child Arrangement Orders which was 18% of all children leaving care
- 32 children left our care due to turning 18 years of age which accounts for 25% of all children who left our care
- Overall, 72% of children leaving our care achieved permanence either through adoption, Special Guardianship Orders, Child Arrangement Orders or returned home to live with parents or relatives. This is a 4% increase from the previous year of 69%

Children in our care outcomes

There were 43 children in our care who had been missing during 2024/25 accounting for 8%. This is the same proportion as during the previous year and remains below comparators (SN 10%, England 11%, Y&H 9%).

There were 7 children in our care at the year-end aged 10 and over who had been convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand in 2024/25 accounting for 3% of children in our care aged over 10. This is a decrease from 5% in the previous reporting year and in line with SN at 3%.

Development of the IRO service

This section includes the context within which the IRO service is set, the make-up of the team, continuity of employment and how it reflects the identity of children in our care.

There has remained a permanent, experienced Director of Children's Services (DCS) and a permanent leadership and management team inclusive of Service Directors, Deputy Service Directors, Service Leads and Practice Supervisors across children's social care.

The IRO Service is managed under the DCS via the Service Director for Regulated Services. The Service Manager reports to the Deputy Service Director: Practice, Standards and Principal Social Worker who is experienced in managing IRO services and sits under the Service Director for Regulated Services.

The IRO service is made up of permanent and experienced social workers with experience of management. The majority of the IROs have worked within the local authority for a significant period of time, with the exception of the Service Manager who has been in this position for three years.

The current IRO service is comprised of a Service Manager, seven permanent full time equivalent IROs, with six female, one male, all with a White British ethnicity. The composition of the IROs broadly reflects the identity and ethnicity of the child in our care population.

The IRO Handbook 2010 states that a full time IRO should have been between 50-70 cases. Caseloads for individual IROs during 2024/25 have remained consistently between 60-65 cases.

During the year, the service continued to hold face to face or hybrid approaches to children in our care reviews with face-to-face meetings being the first option.

The IRO Handbook 2010 highlights that sufficient administrative support for IROs is required to facilitate the delivery of an efficient and effective review process, enabling review meetings to take place in accordance with the regulations and good practice.

The IRO Handbook stipulates that invitations to reviews and consultations should be sent out to all those participating in the review at least 10 working days before the meeting and the record of the review should be distributed within 20 working days.

Business support services within NEL Council attached to the IRO service offer administrative support in relation to IRO activity to a sufficient level, ensuring that invitations to reviews and consultations are sent out within timescales, social worker and other agencies reports, including health assessments and personal education plans and other relevant reports are collated and uploaded to the electronic case file system to inform reviews, with a centralised diary being maintained and some minuting of review meetings being provided.

During the year the Service Manager has monitored review preparation daily and contacts social work teams as needed to ensure that review meetings are held within timescale.

Timeliness of reviews, monitoring and quality assurance

IROs undertake reviews of children's care plans within 20 working days of a child entering care. The second review is held no more than three months after the first and the third and subsequent reviews no more than six months after the previous one. Additional reviews are held in specific circumstances as specified in the IRO Handbook.

During 2024/25 there were 97% of children in our care reviews held within timescale which was an increase of 2% from the previous year.

Of the small proportion of reviews that were held out of timescale, reasons include non-attendance of key professionals or late receipt of assessments/reports, each of these reviews were held as soon as possible and the specific issues addressed with the relevant staff to avoid recurrence.

IROs have a monitoring role in between reviews. If the child's care plan continues to meet the needs of the child there may be no need for any communication between the IRO and the social worker or the child. However, in the event of a change/event in the child's life that is significant, the social worker must inform the IRO. This includes for example, a proposed change of a care plan arising at short notice in the course of proceedings following on directions from the court,

where agreed decisions from a review are not carried out within the specified timescale or a major change to family time arrangements etc.

In NEL, IROs have a responsibility to proactively case track children's care plans in between reviews to ensure that care plans are progressing, including in relation to permanence and that agreed review decisions are undertaken in a timely way.

During supervision with the IRO the Service Manager uses a system whereby children are rated as red, amber or green (RAG) in relation to the need for and frequency of IRO oversight through case tracking. This acts as guidance and enables IROs to prioritise case tracking on children's cases. Those cases rated as red are in care proceedings and also include cases where permanence plans for children need to be achieved or where a child's placement has disrupted and such children cases receive monthly oversight by IROs. Amber rated cases are those where there are issues relating to the stability of the child's placement and receive bi-monthly oversight and green rated cases indicate that children are living in stable homes and receive mid-point oversight between reviews.

The Service Manager has monitored the RAG ratings through bi-monthly IRO supervision and over the year this oversight has increased the IROs footprint which is evidenced more significantly within children's case records.

This methodology of IRO oversight has continued to be cascaded across children's social care to support communication between IROs, social workers and practice supervisors and to enable care plans to be progressed.

Children's participation in reviews

The IRO Handbook says that 'a review for a looked after child forms part of a continuing planning process for that child and is held in order to make plans to safeguard and promote the child's welfare' and that a review is 'the child's meeting' which can be held as a series of meetings if required. It also outlines that both IROs and social workers should speak with children before reviews and the IRO is responsible for making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help them if required.

During the year 92% of reviews included children's participation (discounting children aged under four years old). During 2023/24 this was at 96% for children's participation.

IROs have promoted and supported children to receive advocacy from the National Youth Advocacy Service. This formal advocacy has been provided for a few of our children in care and in addition some children have contributed to their reviews through an adult already in their social network. There are plans in place to increase the availability of advocacy for children in our care for 2025/26.

There were 40% of reviews that were attended by children during 2024/25 (discounting children aged under four years old) which is an increase on the previous year for the previous year 33%. Whilst improving, improving children's attendance at reviews is a key focus for development.

Children's participation codes

Participation code	Number of children
PN 0 - under 4 years old	178
PN 1 - attends and speaks	359
PN 2 - attends with advocate	3
PN3 - attends and conveys views symbolically	1
PN 4 - attends but does not contribute	7
PN 5 – does not attend but briefs an advocate	20
PN 6 – does not attend but conveys feelings via other medium	490
PN 7 - does not attend or contribute	42
Total	1100

Procedures for resolving concerns

A key function of IROs is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. The IROs establish positive working relationships with the social workers of the children for whom they are responsible. Where problems are identified in relation to a child's case, as cited in the IRO Handbook, for example in relation to care planning, the implementation of the care plan or decisions relating to it, resource issues or poor practice, in the first instance IROs seek to resolve issues informally with the Social Worker or the social worker's Practice Supervisor. If matters are not resolved in a timescale that is appropriate to the child's needs, they consider taking formal action.

It is a local authority requirement to put in place a formal process for the IRO to raise concerns and to ensure that this process is respected and prioritised by managers. It involves escalating the matter in dispute through a number of levels of seniority with identified timescales for a response at each stage. IROs may bypass any stage and progress the dispute to the level they consider most appropriate. The formal dispute resolution process within NEL has a total timescale of 20 working days as per the IRO Handbook.

A Professional Challenge and Escalation policy and procedure has been in place since 2022 including a dispute resolution form on the children's social care services electronic case management system. During the last year it has been renamed the Dispute Resolution policy and procedure. IROs record the dispute resolution process on children's case files. Regular IRO workshops have been held across children's social care to facilitate understanding of the Dispute Resolution policy and procedure.

During 2024/25 there were 114 dispute resolutions. This is a significant reduction when compared with 303 dispute resolutions during the previous year. The significant decrease in dispute resolutions has been due to the establishment of a more stable workforce where there is clear direction through supervision and increased management oversight which is improving practice in care planning. In addition, IROs have built collaborative relationships with permanent Social Workers and Practice Supervisors in the wider context of a permanent management and leadership team.

A significant difference during 2024/25 has been that 89% of disputes have been resolved at the informal level with Social Workers or at the level of Practice Supervisor compared to 46% of disputes being resolved informally or at Practice Supervisor level during 2023/24. This is indicative of the significant shift to a permanent and stable workforce becoming incrementally in place over the last year and the increased responsiveness of Social Workers and Practice Supervisors.

IROs have the power to refer dispute resolution matters to Cafcass at any point in the dispute resolution process and this would require the matter being brought to the attention of the NEL DCS to seek resolution prior to this. During the year, the IRO service has had no cause to refer any matter to Cafcass.

Dispute resolution stages

Dispute resolution stage	Number resolved
Informal	51
Stage 1 – Practice Supervisor level	50
Stage 2 – Service Lead level	6
Stage 3 – Deputy Service Director level	7
Stage 4 - Service Director level	0
Escalation to Cafcass	0
Ongoing as at year end	0
Total	114

The table below shows the categories of dispute resolution issues. This has enabled the IRO service to analyse and raise emerging themes during managers and senior leaders’ meetings to inform practice improvement.

It is noted that there were three recognitions of good practice raised within the dispute resolution process and these have not been removed from the denominator in relation to dispute resolution figure in this report. As part of monitoring the child’s case on an ongoing basis, IROs should recognise and report on good practice. During 2025/26 the IRO service will develop a differentiated recording process for such important positive recognition or utilise the existing process through the dispute resolution process and report on ‘recognition of good practice’ as a separate category.

Dispute resolution categories

Dispute resolution category	Number
Resource issues impacting on progress of care/permanency planning	5
Minimum statutory requirements not met	30
Drift and delay in progress of care plan, achieving permanency and/or transition to adulthood	50
Placement not meeting child’s needs or is unassessed	3
Child’s lived experience not informing assessment and planning	4
Escalation of risks	9
Other	10
Recognition of good practice	3
Total	114

Good practice and issues for further development

Children in our care have benefited from having a consistent IRO, which in some instances has been for a number of years.

Supervision of IROs has been consistently held every two months by the Service Manager.

During 2023/24 the IRO's began to use a style of recording whereby they write their review records and consultation visits to the child in line with the child's age and understanding. This new approach has continued to be embedded during 2024/25. This writing 'to' instead of 'about' children has enabled IROs to keep children as their focus in decision making and in how decisions are framed. It improves children's ability to understand their review records at the time and is important for if children decide to access their records when they become adults.

The IROs actively consider diversity issues in their practice including children and families ethnicity, religion/fait, culture and identity and strive to ensure that protected characteristics are taken into consideration. The IRO service ensures that where children/parents do not speak or understand English that an interpreter is present in meetings and where necessary records of meetings are translated into the child/parent's language.

There are a number of children placed out of the NEL area and the Service Manager mitigates the impact of IROs travel time by ensuring that children in specific areas are allocated to the same IRO who has other children in that area. This promotes efficient and effective practice as a number of reviews can be held within a concentrated period of time.

During the year IROs have continued to deliver monthly workshops to enable the Children's Services and wider workforce to understand the role of the IRO and case review process, and to raise awareness in relation to associated policy, procedure and practice expectations. The role of the IRO has been presented and explained to newly qualified social workers within their assessed and supported year of employment and feedback is that this was beneficial and enabled them to be clear about their responsibilities around care planning and reviewing.

The IROs Service Manager has met quarterly with the Cafcass Service Manager, Children's Assessment and Safeguarding Service Leads and Legal services to discuss issues and improve partnership working and practice. This has supported collaborative working and strengthened communication to improve services for children in our care to achieve better outcomes and also celebrate good practice.

The IROs service has developed a children's participation and consultation Bake Off activity including children in our care aged 8 - 14 years old and their foster carers. During the year there have been two events with themes of Halloween held on 28/10/24 and Christmas on 16/12/24. Both of these events were attended by 8 to 10 children and some foster carers. The impact has been that children have learnt baking skills, developed their social and emotional skills and made new friendships in a safe environment. Both events have been attended by the DCS and senior leaders with a celebration of the children's baking culminating in awards. Due to the success of these events and at the children's request, the IRS service will continue with such events for children and carers and have planned to hold an Easter themed Bake Off during April 2025. The intention is to build in the opportunity for consultation with the children on specific issues and feed this into practice and service development.

The monthly IRO Practice Development meetings have been strengthened during the last year to focus on peer auditing, discussion on specific local and national issues and consideration of research. These sessions promote IROs continued professional development, seek to strengthen IRO practice improvement and further development. During 2024/25, discussions have included the revised Helping, Supporting and Protecting Children and Families in North East Lincolnshire 2024/28 threshold document, NEL Practice Approach, NEL Risk Analysis Framework and the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's review on Safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings.

A revision has been made to the IRO policy and procedure during the last year with the development of the Case Review policy and procedures as part of the suite of Children's Services policies and procedures. Workshops continue to be held across Children's Services by the IRO service to enable a full understanding of IROs and other practitioners' roles and responsibilities around care planning and reviewing practice and processes.

The IROs and Service Manager have taken part in Relational Practice training with Mark Finnis to further develop relationship-based practice as part of the NEL Practice Approach and to embed this into practice.

The IRO service has received training in cultural competency through a bespoke session with an independent provider as part of a wider children's social care training programme. This has strengthened IROs knowledge, skills and ability to understand, challenge and improve practice to achieve good outcomes for children and young people.

The Service Manager has attended quarterly regional and national IRO Service Manager meetings during the year. This has facilitated the IRO service remaining up to date with other local authority area developments and any emerging themes or issues.

IRO service recommendations for 2025/26

The following recommendations are made for further development throughout 2025/26:

1. Report on the timescales for recording and distribution of review meeting records using the new functionality of the electronic case management system. Monitor and address any issues that arise in timeliness of recording and distribution.
2. Further development by the IRS service of the systematic tracking of children's permanence plans.
3. IROs to continue to improve the quality and impact of their case tracking to ensure that review decisions are always put into action in a timely manner and children's permanence plans are progressed until permanence is achieved.
4. IROs to improve the quality and impact of their pre-review consultations and better support children's attendance at/or contribution to their reviews so that more children can share their views and influence their plans, including through the support of an advocate. This further development will take place within the wider context of developing our local advocacy offer.

5. Respond to the feedback from the children/young people's Our Voice Listen Up group to enhance IROs relational practice and processes.
6. The IRO service to develop a differentiated recording process for positive recognition of good practice across children's social care or utilise the existing process through the dispute resolution process and report on 'recognition of good practice' as a separate category.
7. Review, refresh and continue to deliver workshops to the Children's Services and wider workforce on the reviewing process. To include developing new approaches such as bespoke sessions during new practitioners' induction, training for foster carers and IROs attending existing practice development forums such as lunch and learn sessions.
8. Continue to arrange, hold and report on the Bake-off events for children in our care and their foster carers as part of further developing our relational approach and consultation with children.

Date: 27/05/2025