



Shropshire Independent Review Unit Annual Report 2024/25

Reporting Period	31 st March 2024 to 1 st April 2025
Report of	INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE Principal Independent Reviewing Officer
Report to	Jennie Lowe Service Manager
Report Author	Shakuntla Sian
Date of Report	14 th April 2025



By treating our children and young people with respect, love and trust and with the right amount of encouragement we can inspire them to dream big, build relationships and connections that matter and together with kindness and a sense of belonging we can do great things

1. Introduction to the Shropshire Independent Review Unit

- 1.1 The Independent Reviewing Unit in Shropshire operates within the framework of Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023); the IRO Handbook (2010); the Children Act 1989 guidance and regulation Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review. This is the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of children and young people in care.
- 1.2 The Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Independent Chairs (ICs) have a responsibility to ensure that plans are timely, effective and achieve good outcomes for children and young people. They have a responsibility to promote best practice and highlight professional standards across the children's social work service. The role is key to the improvement and quality assurance of the Care Planning for Children Looked After; children on a Child Protection Plan and challenging any drift and delay.
- 1.3 The IRO handbook outlines the duty of the IRO Manager/Principal IRO (PIRO) to produce an Annual Report for the scrutiny of the Director, Assistant Director and members of the Corporate Parenting Board. It should also be available to the public on the Council website.
- 1.4 The IRU service in Shropshire Council consists of:
 - Jennie Lowe – Principal Social Worker and Service Manager for Safeguarding Quality Assurance, Learning & Workforce Development
 - Shakuntla Sian – Principal Independent Reviewing Officer (Interim)
 - 14.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) IROs/ICs
- 1.5 This report covers the period from 31st March 2024 to 1st April 2025.

2. Significant events and staffing in IRU

- 2.1 It is important to highlight a significant event which occurred before this reporting period; the Focused Visit undertaken by Ofsted in November 2023, where clear concerns were raised in respect of the capacity within and effectiveness of the IRU.
- 2.2 Excerpts from the subsequent Ofsted letter (published on 12th January 2024) which relate to the IRU included:

“Capacity within the quality performance and assurance service is insufficient to meet demand, due to the increased numbers of those children who are in care and subject to child protection plans. Caseloads for child protection conference chairs are too high. As a result, child protection plans do not receive the appropriate level of independent scrutiny and challenge when there is a lack of progress for children”.

“Children remain on child protection plans for too long and there is an absence of robust and effective challenge by child protection chairs”.

“There is insufficient grip of practice by social workers, managers and child protection chairs in driving forward plans”.

2.3 In response to these concerns and the Priority Actions outlined by Ofsted, the Executive Management Team committed to establishing a Children’s Improvement Board, supported by the DfE, plus some immediate actions which included establishing 5 new permanent IRO/IC roles. The subsequent recruitment campaign saw a good deal of interest in the IRO roles and interviews were undertaken, through which 3 high quality, experienced (external) IROs were appointed between April and June 2024. This was a significant ‘success story’, however the remaining 2 IRO/IC posts remain vacant until early October 2024 both were appointed to from internal candidates.

2.4 There have been other changes in staffing arrangements within the IRU that require have had an impact in/on the last financial year:

- During Quarter 3 of 2023 there was no Principal IRO (PIRO) in place and IRU were solely reliant upon the Service Manager for the day to day running of the service. Interim PIRO was appointed in January 2024; since being appointed the PIRO has provided monthly supervision to the IROs and has had direct responsibility for the team.
- 1 (agency) IRO left the service in March 2024 owing to personal reasons. This individual left behind uncompleted work and a significant backlog and gaps in service that their successor (one of the newly appointed external IROs) had to spend several months resolving.
- 1 (permanent) IRO reduced their hours significantly for a temporary period from end of December 2023 to May 2024. This IRO’s allocated children who required reviews during this period were reviewed by other IROs and, dependent upon need and urgency, some children were reallocated.
- 1 (permanent) IRO who had been on secondment to another area of the service returned to the IRU in April 2024.
- 1 (permanent) IRO offered their resignation in July 2024, and this was accepted; they left the service in Quarter 3 of this reporting period. It needs to be noted that the IRO left significant gaps in service with some children not being reviewed within the recommended timeframes.
- The IRU experienced some wider staff sickness (including some extended sickness absence) and staff changes, including 1 (permanent) IRO leaving for maternity leave (returned in January 2025). These changes increased significantly upon the pressure on IROs caseloads.

2.5 To summarise, the strategic response to Ofsted’s findings of increasing the capacity within the IRU to allow more manageable caseloads, was very much welcomed. Lower caseloads in turn enables greater scrutiny by IROs and evidence of ‘footprint’ on children’s records. Unfortunately, although we were successful in appointing 3 new IROs, all of whom were experienced and confident in their roles, the wider challenges in respect of staff sickness, leave and resignations, resulted in the PIRO being unable to reduce caseload numbers by

any significant degree until the latter part of Q3. This was significantly supported by the addition of 2 locum IROs (1 to cover the vacancy left by permanent IRO leaving in Q3, 1 as additional capacity).

2.6 At the end of this reporting period, the total number of full time and part time staff was 16 which equates to 14.5 FTE IROs. The longest serving member of staff has been with the service since 2008. The 2 most recent members of the team joined in October 2024 as locum IROs as extra capacity.

2.7 The IRU team remains experienced; some colleagues have worked in Shropshire Council for over 20 years, and all have at least 5 years post-qualifying experience in social work, most with considerably more than this. Despite the staffing challenges described above, it is important to note that there are low levels of staff turnover in the IRU. It is fair to say that retention in the Shropshire Council IRU is a significant strength which has enabled some IROs to be consistently involved with children and young people for most if not all their time in our Care.

2.8 Those longest standing IROs have strong and enduring relationships with the children and young people they are responsible for; in some cases, they are the most consistent professional in the children's lives. Our data indicates that 16% of children and young people have had a consistent IRO for two years or more which has contributed to the alignment of Shropshire's Restorative, relationship-based model promoting good relationships between children and their IROs. It is recognised that, due to staff shortages during this reporting period, it has not always been possible to maintain this consistency for all of our children. Every effort is made to ensure the same IRO reviews all the children in a sibling group to maintain continuity for children and parents alike.

2.9 The team is predominantly staffed by females, of the 16 IROs in post only 3 are male. Most staff are of White British ethnic origin. There is a need for increased diversity within the team in respect of greater representation from colleagues from the global majority.

3. Legal Context

3.1 Legislation for the reviewing of children and young people in Local Authority Care is supported by detailed guidance which informs the planning in Shropshire IRU. The appointment of an Independent Review Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under the guidance of The Children's Act 1989, Children's and Young Persons Act 2008, Children and Social Work Act 2017 (Corporate Parenting Principles), Care Act 2014, Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 and the IRO Handbook 2010 which provides a statutory guidance for IRO's and sets out the functions of the local authority in terms of case management and review for children in care. Hence, IROs are guided by a broad range of legislation and statutory guidance to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in care. [iro statutory guidance iros and las march 2010 tagged.pdf\(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

3.2 The IRO Handbook (2010) states that the statutory duties of the IRO are to:

- Monitor the Local Authority's performance of their functions in relation to the child's case.
- Participate in any review of the child's case.
- Ensure any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning their case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority.

3.3 IROs are required to oversee and scrutinise the Care Plan devised for every child or young person placed in the care of the Local Authority. The IRO will ensure that everyone who is involved in the child or young person's life fulfils the responsibilities placed upon them.

4. Caseloads

4.1 The IRO Handbook (2010) recommends IRO caseloads of 50-70 children per (full time) IRO. In Shropshire's IRU, the average full-time caseload includes children and young people in care, children on a Child Protection Plan; and those receiving care through short breaks (Section 20). As already highlighted, IRO caseloads at the beginning of this reporting period were far in excess of this recommended range, with the average caseload for a full time IRO on 31st March 2024 being 76 and part time is 55 although the majority of full time IROs had caseloads that peaked between 89 – 108.

4.2 As clearly recognised by Ofsted in the November 2023 Focused Visit, the high caseload numbers were impacting upon the ability of IROs/ICs to meet their statutory duties as outlined above.

4.3 Following the recruitment of additional IROs (albeit during a period of other staff leaving and experiencing sickness absence), by 1st April 2025, the average full time IRO caseload was 65 children – although some IROs had caseloads that peaked between 69-72: with the part time equivalent being 36.

4.4 This reduction in caseloads is significant and has been particularly noted as so by our most longstanding colleagues, some of whom had been carrying caseloads more than 108 children for several years. In line with the reduction in caseloads, we are seeing greater evidence of IRO 'footprint' on children's files; increased IRO visits to children in their homes (placements) and more timely management of Rags raised within the DRP process. There is more to be done across these areas – which will be detailed later within this report.

4.5 In respect of diversity, as of 1st April 2025 the tables below reflect the ethnic demographic of the Child Looked After (Table 1) and that of the IRO/ ICs (Table 2) indicating ethnic breakdown of the IRU Service is closely matched to the profile of the children they work with.

Table 1:

Ethnicity of CLA	Percentage
White British	84%
Any other White background	2%
White and Asian	2%
Other background	2%
Any other mixed background	2%
African	2%

Arab	2%
White and Black Caribbean	2%
Any other Asian Background	1%
White and Black African	1%
Not obtained	0%
White Irish	0%
Traveller of Irish Heritage	0%
Any other Black background	0%
Gypsy/Roma	0%
Indian	0%
Pakistani	0%
Caribbean	0%
Total	100%

Table 2:

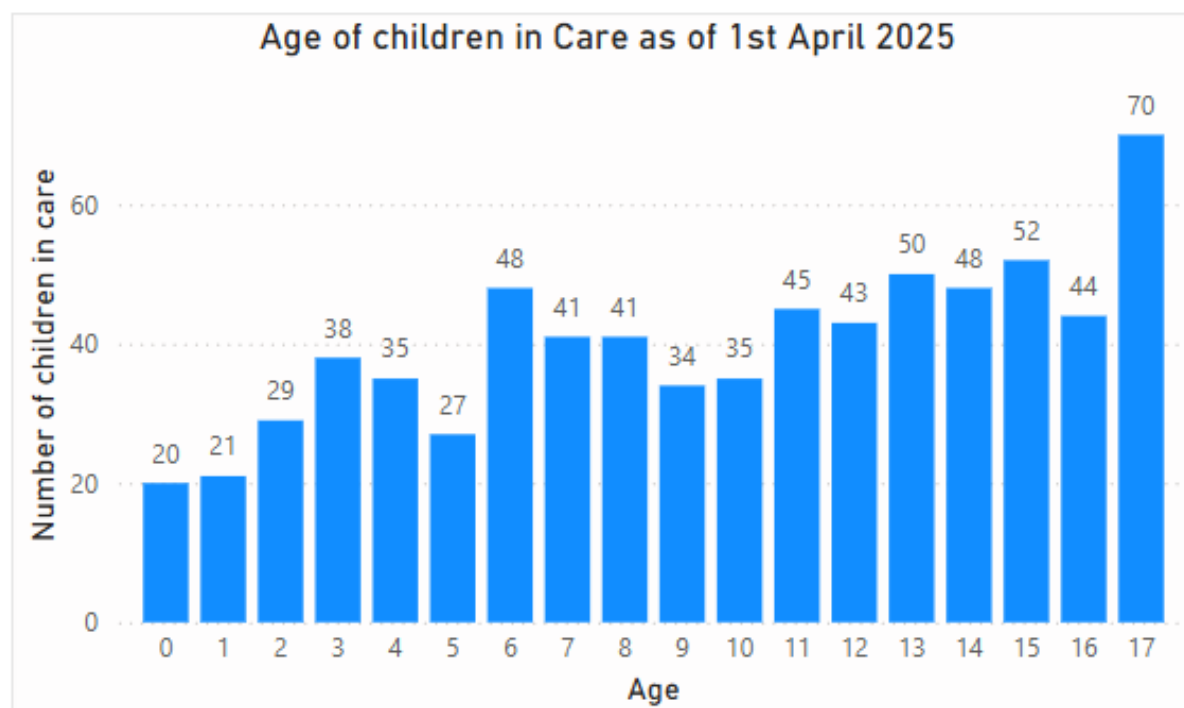
Ethnicity of IRO	Number	Percentage
White British	12	76%
Other background	2	14%
White Irish	2	14%
Total	16	100%

5. Our Children and Young People in Care Population

5.1 There were 721 children and young people in our Care as of 1st April 2025 compared to CLA population being 714 on 31st March 2024. Of these children 329 (46%) were female 392 (54%) male there was not much change the previous year as there were 317 (44%) female and 397 (56%) males.

5.2 Table 3 below indicates an even spread of ages of children in the Care of Shropshire Local Authority, with the majority of our CLA being aged 10 and above.

Table 3



5.3 As of 1st April 2025 the breakdown of legal status for children and young people in Shropshire's Care was as follows:

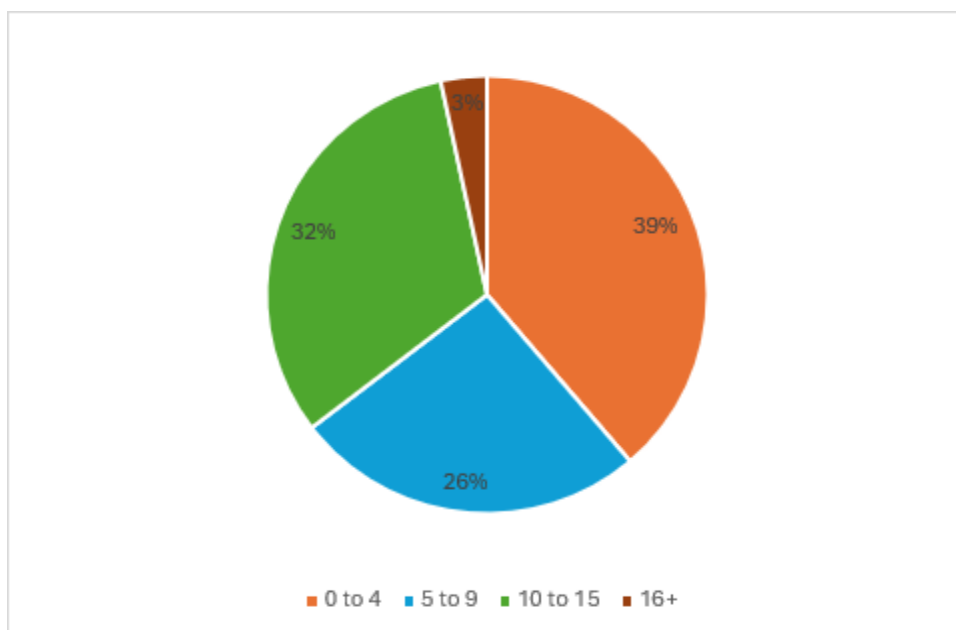
- 500 children subject to a Care Order which was an increase of 13% from the beginning of the reporting period.
- 104 children subject to an Interim Care Order which was a decrease of 26% from the beginning of the reporting period.
- 45 children with a Placement Order status which was an increase of 29% from the beginning of the reporting period.
- 1 child was in Local Authority on remand or committed for trial or sentence.
- 71 children were placed in Voluntarily Care under the auspices of S20 which includes Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) which is a decrease of 27% from the beginning of the reporting period.
- 25 children placed with adopters which is an increase 92% from the beginning of the reporting period.

6. Our Children subject to Child Protection Planning

6.1 On 1st April 2025 the number of children in Shropshire Council IRU that were subject to Child Protection Planning was 178. This number has decreased by 10% from the beginning of the reporting period. This indicates a rise in children and young people who required intervention and planning to ensure their safety and well-being. The decrease in the number of children on the Child Protection Plan is attributed to the work being completed and has effectively enabled a step down out of Child Protection.

6.2 A key initiative involved holding Child Protection Plan Review Panels, Chaired by the Case Management Service Manager. These panels included the participation of the PIRO, a social worker and a team manager. The purpose of these panels was to explore available options for the upcoming Review Child Protection Conference (RCPC). The discussions focused on determining the appropriate threshold for child protection and considered whether children could be transitioned to a Child in Need Plan or moved to Early Help Intervention. The panels ensured the children had increased oversight from Service Manager and PIRO. The panel was effective and as a result several children were successfully stepped down from the Child Protection Plan, indicating progress in their planning process and a reduced need for intensive intervention.

6.3 The age of children on a Child Protection Plan for 1st April 2025 is illustrated in the pie chart below indicating that the most vulnerable population of our children needing safeguarding via a Plan is 0–4-year-old and is closely followed by the other age groups.



6.4 In this reporting period, 15% of children starting on a Child Protection Plan have had a previous Plan. The repeat Child Protection Plan indicates the difficulty of establishing whether thresholds are met due to the reliance on information provided by various agencies, the selective information shared making it challenging for Chairs to gather comprehensive data and the legal constraints involved. The repeated patterns and themes of returning to be made subject to a Child Protection Plan highlights that parents need more work around their presenting issues not just during the Child Protection process but beyond for the cycle to end and a sustained change to occur. The application of the correct thresholds at ICPC and at RCPC when considering recommendations for step downs is an ongoing discussion with Independent Chairs.

7. The IRO Service

7.1 The IRO handbook clearly states the Local Authority is required to carry out Review meetings in line with timings specified in the Regulations (Regulation 33):

- The first review of a child's case within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after.
- The second review no more than three months after the first.
- A review whenever the IRO directs; and
- A review in all other circumstance's as specified in the Regulations.

7.2 From 31st March 2024 to 1st April 2025 a total of 1666 Child Looked After Reviews have taken place with 83% being within the expected timescales. We saw a decrease in timescales for reviews being met due to several reasons, but the main reason being staff shortages resulted in 17% of reviews not completed within the expected timescales. In the previous year's same reporting period 1407 (77%) children were reviewed within timescales; previous year 2021-22 was 1328 (87%) in timescales.

7.3 Data indicates the poorest IRU performance was in June 2024 when timeliness of reviews was impacted due to internal staff shortages and external reasons within the Local Authority. It is recognised that the review timeliness needs to improve and will be a service priority.

7.4 The IRO is required to speak to the child alone prior to the first review and before every subsequent review (regulation 36) the requirement for direct contact with the child extends to observation of babies and younger children. It is fair to say that IRO visits are improving over the reporting period but there is a way to go.

7.5 Every effort is made to ensure an IRO is allocated within 24 hours of the IRU being informed of the child's entry into care. Data indicates 39% of children who have entered the care system were allocated an IRO within 24 hours and 52% within 5 working days.

7.6 In the main, siblings, whether placed together or apart, are allocated the same IRO, ensuring consistency of information exchange, oversight of care planning and decision making, including sibling family time, and is particularly of benefit when children have different social workers.

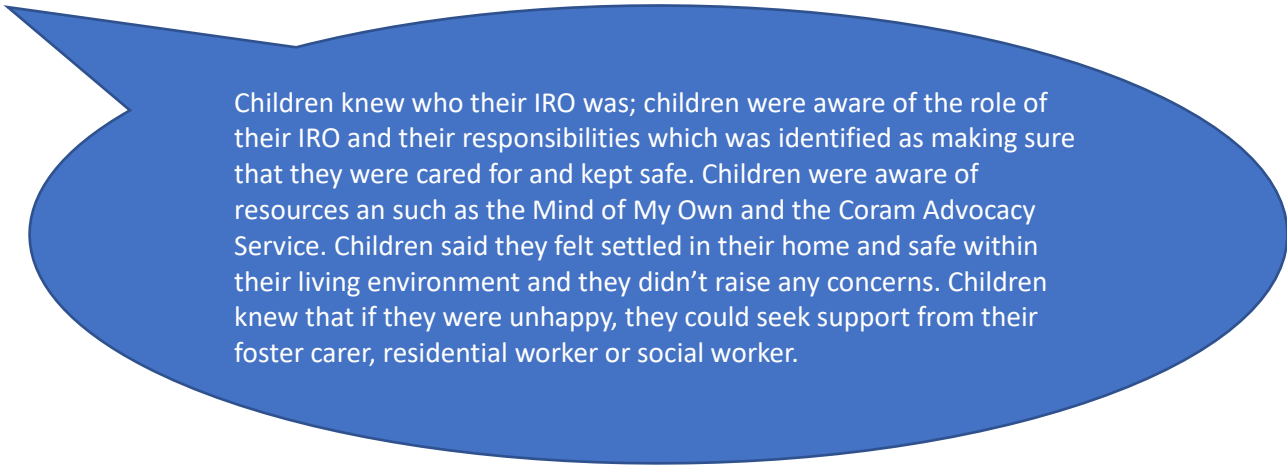
7.7 Although, consultation forms for children, parents and carers are available they are only in paper format as such are rarely being used. The IROs are highly skilled in their field and able to focus upon ensuring the child and young person's wishes, feelings and views are pivotal to and at the forefront of Care Planning in reviews. IROs are mindful when seeking views that the child, young person's age, communication needs and stage of development is considered and where required they may need assistance from their carer/parent/advocate to voice their views. IROs are using a personable, child centred approach to engage children before their reviews via home visits and encourage participation in reviews and are actively promoting the use of Mind of My Own.

7.8 The involvement of children in their own reviews is regarded as an essential part of the process: 'A key task for the IRO will be to ensure that the review processes, and particularly review meetings, remain child and family centred' (IRO guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002). The IRO has an important role in ensuring that the child:

- Can make a meaningful contribution to their review.
- Speak for themselves if they are able and willing to do so; and where there is not possible that their views are conveyed by someone else on their behalf or by an appropriate medium; and
- Has been given the opportunity to make a written contribution to the meeting, particularly if they have chosen not to attend or are unable to attend for some other reason.

7.9 Performance data indicates that there was an increase of 256 more reviews undertaken than from the previous year and children's participation increased. Overall, 77% of children either attended their review in person, sent their views; briefed their advocate or attended without contributing - this was an increase of 37% from the previous year. Also, 16% related to children being aged 4 and under at the time of the review. In addition, IROs work increased for when the Care Plans were ready to be presented to Court and Ratification Meetings were required.

7.10 The views of children are captured within their review record, every effort is made to ensure their wishes, feelings and views have been addressed and acted upon with IROs showing a clear direction of thought. Information obtained from the Virtual School Council by an IRO representative indicated that:



Children knew who their IRO was; children were aware of the role of their IRO and their responsibilities which was identified as making sure that they were cared for and kept safe. Children were aware of resources such as the Mind of My Own and the Coram Advocacy Service. Children said they felt settled in their home and safe within their living environment and they didn't raise any concerns. Children knew that if they were unhappy, they could seek support from their foster carer, residential worker or social worker.

7.11 IRU have a mechanism to ensure feedback from children is received, this is in the form of consultation forms; children attending their reviews and via the Mind of My Own App. Unfortunately, in this reporting period, only 93 children have participated their views via the Mind of My Own mechanism. IROs are encouraging children to use this App, and it will be a priority action for IRU.

7.12 In this reporting period IRU have received 3 formal complaints which were all resolved and not upheld.

7.13 IROs need to improve the participation of parents in Child Looked After reviews as data suggests only 42% of mothers and 18% of fathers attended their child's review. However, for children on a Child Protection Plan in this reporting period data indicates an equal amount 54% of mothers and fathers attended either their child's ICPC or RCPC - this remains work in progress and is a priority action.

8. Conduct of the organisation in relation to the Children Looked After Reviews and Child Protection Conferences

8.1 The IRO is responsible for quality assuring each child's case at every review ensuring that challenge of practice and escalation of areas of concern occurs on a frequent basis. The IRO Handbook sets out the purpose and requirements to create a local dispute resolution process, both formal and informal (*Chapter 6 of the IRO Handbook- Dispute Resolution and Complaints*).

8.2 In Shropshire Council IRU the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) evaluates the plans for children subject to Child Protection Plans and for CLA with a RAG rating that is Red, Amber and Green. Amber and Red Rags indicate that the IRO has concerns with care planning, statutory compliance, social worker practice, team manager oversight and any drift or delay. The IRO will raise a RAG appropriate to the severity of the concerns.

8.3 To monitor the progress of the Amber and Red RAGs the IROs attend a Dispute Resolution Clinic each week to ensure that the PIRO is alert to all RAGs raised and for IROs to report on the progress of open RAGs. As required, RAGs are followed up through the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). Appropriate and consistent use of the DRP demonstrates that IROs are exerting effective challenge. In the IRU it has been found that the DRP meetings have previously not been used effectively by all IROs, therefore within this reporting period different methods have been used to ensure accountability from all IROs. The DRP has been subject to review throughout the reporting period and a revised, clearer, more structured process is being developed.

9. RAGs

9.1 In this reporting period data indicates 53% of all CLA Reviews completed were Green, 31% Amber and 16% Red RAGs.

9.2 Amber RAGs: 400 were resolved at Stage 1 Team Manager level showing concerns were taken on board and addressed at the lowest level possible by the Local Authority, resolving the RAG in a timely manner. 51 Amber RAGs were resolved at Stage 2 Service Manager Level and 9 at Stage 3 – Assistant Director Level.

9.3 Red RAGs: 230 resolved at Stage 1 Team Manager level, 18 were resolved formally at Service Manager Level and 3 at Assistant Director level which indicates the Local Authority effectively understands the challenge from the IROs ensuring drift and delay is executed in a timely manner.

9.4 In addition, 11 DRP meetings took place to resolve outcomes for children where drift and delay had been identified.

9.5 Equally, in this reporting period for children on a Child Protection Plan 472 RAGs were completed of which 50% were rated Green, 26% Amber and 24% Red; this was a slight decrease from the previous year.

9.6 The timeliness of RAGs being issued has varied amongst IROs which is an area of work being completed to ensure RAGs are issued on time after the review/conference, this is a priority action.

10. Quality Assurance, IROs collaborative work with the Local Authority and other agencies

10.1 An integral part of the IRO role is to quality assure the work of the Local Authority in relation to Care Planning for children and to identify areas of good practice as well as issues of concern. This reporting period IROs have issued (for Children Looked After and on a Child Protection Plan) 1081 Green Rags reflecting effective working of the Plan; that is timely and meeting the needs of the children and young people. IROs provide a summary of their finding on the RAG and in some instances will send out a Good Practice Notification.

10.2 As part of Practice Week in September 2024 a group of our IROs promoted good practice standards by delivering a Masterclass in relation to the role of an IRO and Independent Chair across the Children's Services and this work was received well. The purpose of the session was to promote better communication,

collaboration and connectivity between Social Workers across Children's Services and Independent Reviewing Officers with the aim of ensuring a high-quality service to the children subject to Child Protection Plans and children who are being 'cared for/looked after' by Shropshire Council. The sessions were well attended and received positive feedback from social workers and the wider social work teams.

- 10.3 With agreement IROs have had periods within this reporting year when they have been exempt from completing Child Journey Audits (CJAs) due to excessively high caseloads. They received a grace period in Q1 and Q4 while three new IROs were being recruited. This allowed the IROs to feel heard and not be in a position where they felt they were continuing to fail to meet expectations. IROs felt acknowledged and heard. Despite some ongoing resistance, most of the IROs have now completed several CJAs and have given feedback that it is an activity which helped them gain a wider view of a child's journey in the service and assisted them to think in more depth about how they discharge their duties as IROs. PIRO has dip sampled the IROs work to ensure they are meeting and adhering to their statutory duties.
- 10.4 The PIRO and IROs are integral to several Panels (Child Protection and Children Looked After) and planning groups (Final Evidence and Step-down meetings) in which the IRO perspective is valued as part of the decision-making process alongside that of the children's social work teams.
- 10.5 IRU are a representative within the CAFCASS/Children's Services, where monthly performance meetings take place. During these meetings there are discussions regards to Court Care Proceedings to identify where there is drift and delay in meeting the recommended 26 weeks conclusion of proceedings. The IRU provide information in relation to common themes and agreements of working together, formulate action points to a timescale to ensure that prompt long-term permanency for children and young people is achieved.
- 10.6 The IRU have a link with the UASC team to look at practice issues and themes that may arise for the young person who is seeking asylum. The aim together with operational services is to formulate and agree an action plan to ensure the young people are provided with the necessary holistic package of care by the placement providers.
- 10.7 One IRO is part of the monthly Exploitation Panel meetings whereby social workers present their updated risk assessments for children and young people who are at risk of either sexual or criminal exploitation. The meetings scrutinise the reports and make suggestions of what actions can be followed to reduce the risk of exploitation taking place with the outcomes placed upon the children's case record to ensure oversight by management is undertaken and the view of the IRO sought.
- 10.8 The IRU have interface meetings that commenced on the 2nd July 2024 and take place on bi-monthly basis. The purpose of these meetings is to promote communication, collaboration; and connectivity in line with Shropshire's Restorative model. The management of these meetings lays with 3 IROs whom report back to PIRO and Service Manager any issues/ concerns arising. The invitation is extended to Team Managers from the Compass, Assessment: Case Management; Child Looked After teams; Fostering and Adoption including

Stepping Stones. To date these meetings have been received well, they have helped to support arrangements where there have been workflow issues on the children's file as well as promoting the work of the IROs and to strengthen relations.

10.9 The Shropshire Council IRU is part of several quarterly regional safeguarding and IRO forums. These meetings have provided a good opportunity for IROs to network and share ideas for practice improvement. Some IROs attended the Annual Regional IRO conference in January 2025 which enable further understanding of development and processes within the West Midlands region. The IRU is committed to working in partnership with other agencies; the Service Manager works closely with the Police, Education and Health to strengthen conversations re: safeguarding issues for children and young people.

11. PIRO review of last financial year

11.1 Impact of Business Support Review

During the beginning of the reporting period, there was a significant reduction in the administrative support to the IRU. Unfortunately, the key business support worker moved to a new role and was not replaced until Q4 of the reporting period, following the completion of the Business Support Review. Four business support workers have been absent for extended periods throughout the year due to long-term sickness or absent due to maternity leave. The team of eight admin workers was down to four, with only 50% of support available to IROs/ICs this had a significant impact on what support was available to the team. The biggest impact was on minuting Conferences and ensuring that ICPCs were arranged within timescale. From October to end of December 2024 there had been a shift in ICPCs and RCPCs taking place via MS Teams as opposed to face to face for several reasons which includes room availability; staff capacity as admin support had been halved in size. During this time there was a sharp decline in ICPCs taking place on time. In addition, the administrative support provided to the PIRO was limited which impacted upon data being provided and effective analysis taking place.

To overcome the challenges, the PIRO completed some focused work by clarifying to Business Support the statutory duties of IROs/ICs; had daily meetings with admin and senior staff until the matter was resolved. Importantly, ICPC timeliness was hugely impacted and at the end of the reporting period 61% of ICPC where in timescales, prior to this, the figures were far lower. PIRO continues to have regular meetings with Business Support to ensure the IRU is effectively functioning with their administrative duties and tasks.

11.2 Re-establishment of face-to-face conferencing

In total 444 Child Protection Conferences have taken place in this reporting period for 859 children the breakdown in figures indicate 43% ICPCs and 52% RCPCs were held face to face. Data confirms 57% ICPCs and 48% RCPCs were held via on teams (which included 2% of Receiving in ICPCs). As noted above, this remains a key area of priority action.

11.3 Involvement of parents in conferences and CLARs

Independent Chairs have made significant efforts this year to ensure parents attend the ICPC and RCPC data shows 87% of mothers and 63% fathers have attended either an ICPC or RCPC. In terms of children and young people participated in their ICPC or RCPC 65% of children either attended in person, sent their views or were represented by an advocate. A similar trend can be seen for children and young people's participation in their Child Looked After Review which shows this year it was 81% it is worth noting 15% of Children Reviewed under care arrangements were under 4 and 26% of children placed on a Child Protection Plan were under 4 years old.

11.4 Introduction of Magic Notes

During the reporting period in Q4 saw IROs/ICs being introduced to Magic Notes. The use of this AI meeting summary tool has reduced admin time for IROs/ICs and has enabled proficiency in service. IROs/ICs maintain this system is an essential tool for them; one they cannot do without, and it has reduced the admin burden, and they are satisfied with the service.

11.5 Greater use of advocacy

Our contracted advocacy service changed from Coram Voice to VoiceAbility from 1st November 2024 which has been widely advertised within the Local Authority however it has been recognised that the increase in the use of advocates in meetings is needed as the referral to advocacy remains significantly low.

11.6 Revising the CLA Review minutes to make them more restorative

This action is work in progress - IROs are in the main writing their review records to the child in a sensitive and relationship-based manner. Magic Notes is supporting this by utilising the function to change meeting notes into child friendly language.

11.7 Reducing IRO caseloads.

IRU Service has recruited more IROs to the service which has enabled the caseloads to be reduced and be more equitable across the service. It is recognised with the decrease in caseloads has increased IRO scrutiny, challenge and the IRO footprint is an upward trend which is beginning to indicate the effectiveness of the IRO during when challenging drift and delay in Care Plans for children and young people is needed.

11.9 IRO/ICs access to their performance and dashboard

Towards the end of the reporting period the IRO/ICs were introduced to the PowerBI IRU Dashboard. The Dashboard has been a positive factor for the IROs/ICs as they have been able to self-service; understand and improve their performance data and there has been a shift the way they work. In addition, the Dashboard has meant the PIRO has been able to apply scrutiny to the data for IROs/ICs and establish how data can be improved. With support from the Ofsted Improvement Lead, there has been a significant focus for the Local Authority to ensure essential paperwork such as Pre-Meeting reports are completed on time as the absence of these reports affects the LCS workflow, often indicating CLARs as being overdue/out of timescales.

11.10 Discharge Project Team

IROs have worked effectively with the Placement with Parents/SGO Discharge Project Team, supporting the efficient making of SGOs and resolution of care plans for reunification/ending of Care Orders. IRO involvement in this work has been critical to the success of a number of children ceasing to be Looked After and securing permanence in a family environment without statutory intervention.

12. Priorities for 2025-26

- ★ The IRU will ensure all children and young people whether in Care or on a Child Protection Plan receive their paperwork within the required timescales. These documents will be written in a child friendly manner with accessible language.
- ★ The timeliness of CLAs/ICPC and RCPCs has improved, however the data reporting timeliness needs to be consistently at 95% or above. IROs will ensure that ICPCs are convened as face to face meetings.
- ★ IRO/ICs footprint in terms of seeing the child or young person before reviews must be evident in all children's records (or clearly noted why this could not go ahead e.g. child unwilling to meet with IRO). IROs will promote use of Mind of My Own at every Review.
- ★ IRU to review and monitor parental engagement in both conferences and CLAR meetings and use feedback forms. PIRO to provide quarterly reports to share findings across the service.
- ★ IRO/ICs will ensure that all children's Care Plans and Child Protection Plans include SMART targets and will challenge/escalate where this is not the case.
- ★ Representatives from the IRU will engage with a working group to explore the creation of a single LCS document that allows CLAR Minutes and Recommendations to be recorded in the form of a letter to the child.
- ★ IRO/ICs Profile proforma will be developed to be completed by individual IROs at point of allocation and sent to the relevant children and social worker.

13. Conclusion

This report highlights the work of IRU in Shropshire Council from 31st March 2024 to 1st April 2025. There are ongoing efforts and initiatives undertaken by the IRU to enhance the services provided to children and young people under their care.

There has been a significant reduction in IRO caseloads, enabling IROs to establish a stronger presence in children's lives and effectively challenge the Local Authority on issues requiring resolution. The focus applied by IROs and ICs to ensure that work-flows show an accurate representation of a child's journey has been significant and indicative of the commitment of these professionals to the children they are responsible for.

It will be important that IROs and ICs continue to be enabled to ensure that the progress made in clearing backlogs created by unmanageable caseloads is not undermined by increased workloads or poor workload management moving forwards.

High levels of effort and tenacity have been exerted by IROs to ensure that review meetings are held within statutory timescales and to challenge the local authority on drift and delays in care planning. IROs are keen to remain consistent in this area of practice, to ensure that they are doing all they can to achieve positive outcomes for children. As a team, the IRU is committed to ensuring that all children are reviewed within the recommended timescales to maintain and further improve service quality.

There is a clear drive within the IRU to further strengthen IRO footprints on children's records, ensure regular home visits to see children before their CLARs; ensuring parents are present in ICPC/RCPC and CLAs. IRU aim to progress the priority actions as stated in point 11 as a key development focus to ensure IRO's presence is further pronounced and increasingly effective in supporting children's lived experience and to ensure they receive a high-quality service.