

Independent Reviewing Officer Monitoring Report July 2021

Scope of Report:

The purpose of the report is to provide an update to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee (CPAC), concerning key updates and trends for Looked After Children in the last period. The report has traditionally been completed on a bi-annual basis, however has been on hold throughout the pandemic.

Independent Reviewing Role:

The role and function of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and the Local Authority in relation to care planning for Looked After Children are set out in the following –

- *The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014* sets out the main functions of the Care Planning Process and IRO
- *The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Wales) Regulations 2015* - sets out the detail of the IRO's role
- *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, Part 6 Code of Practice* elaborates on the regulations and explain the role and function of the IRO in further detail.

It is a legal requirement for every Looked After Child to have an IRO. Social Care Wales, the regulatory body for Social Work in Wales, describes the IRO as a:

Social worker with particular responsibilities for making sure that individual children receive the care and support services they need. Their specific duties include participating in care and support plan, and placement plan, reviews. They will monitor how well the plans are being delivered to meet the child's well-being outcomes and take action to make sure the plans are revised or renewed where change is required. The independent reviewing officer has specific responsibilities to ensure children and young people's voices are heard, and that they are supported to participate.

The IRO Practice Standards and Good Practice Guide provides guidance for IRO's and Local Authorities in Wales. It summarises a number of issues relating to the role of the IRO that are useful to include here:

- *The IRO's role is to monitor, that is keep an overview of the child's case, not just at formal review meetings, but between review meetings as well.*
- *During the reviewing process the IRO has a duty to look at how the child has been looked after and how the care plan is progressing*
- *As the IRO does not have the power to overrule the Local Authority decision making process, there has to be some way of showing that they are concerned about the progress of a child or young person's case or a decision made in relation to a care and support plan. The local authority*

should have a dispute resolution process by which IRO's can make senior managers in the local authority aware of their concerns, with a view to resolving them. If that internal process does not work, then the IRO may refer to CAFCASS Cymru.

- *The role of the IRO carries with it personal responsibility for carrying out his or her functions. In a case in 2012, **A & S v Lancashire CC [2012] EWHC 1689 (Fam)** it was clarified that the IRO may be held personally responsible for:*
 - a) *Identifying if a child or young person's human rights are being infringed;*
 - b) *Ensuring that the local authority acts upon the recommendations of the LAC Review;*
 - c) *Referring to CAFCASS if the child/young persons' human rights are infringed or significant recommendations of the review are not acted upon.*

A key update that committee members will want to be aware of is the *Public law working group (March 2021)- Public law working group Recommendations to achieve best practice in the child protection and family justice systems*. This makes recommendations about enhanced support for and work with families prior to court proceedings, reducing the number of care proceedings and Looked After Children.

Looked After Reviews:

Looked After Reviews are held within 28 days of a child becoming Looked After. The first review then needs to take place within 3 months and the subsequent reviews take place at least every 6 months for the duration of the child remaining looked after. Where there has been a placement disruption or a significant other change (for instance moving from a foster placement to a residential placement) the review will be brought forward. In the case of children being placed for adoption, the same timescales are adhered to.

Whilst Looked After Reviews are traditionally a face-to-face meeting, throughout the global COVID 19 pandemic, reviews have been held virtually since March 2020. Initially these were convened via the telephone and Whatsapp to include children, carers and parents. Some were undertaken as a series of meetings, to include the right people and gather sufficient information to review the child's plan. Cardiff were one of the first authorities to facilitate review meetings via video conferencing, initially using Skype and then replaced in July 2020 by Microsoft Teams, which we have been using since this time.

The service had to reorganise how we planned and organised meetings, as scheduling and facilitating reviews for over 950+ children presented challenges. Not all carers, parents and children had the same technical knowledge or had access to devices to enable them to participate. Partner agencies also had different IT capabilities, however

all of these obstacles were able to be overcome. Whilst we were worried that virtual meetings could be a barrier to many young people and families participating, in most circumstances we have found the opposite. Children and young people have been telling their IRO's that they often prefer interacting virtually via computers and tablets, as they are usually very familiar with how these work. It has also meant that there is often improved participation from other professionals, as without the added pressures of travelling times, they are able to balance attending more meetings and reviews.

The Reviewing Service:

The Safeguarding and Reviewing Service is responsible for coordinating and chairing Child Protection Conferences as well as Reviewing the plans for all children who are Looked After. The staffing establishment includes 15.5 members of staff employed as Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) with an additional IRO post that exclusively reviews families open to the Integrated Family Support Service (IFSS). The Service Manager directly line manages all IRO and CP chairs, and reports directly to the Director of Children's Services. All IRO and Child Protection (CP) chairs in the service are able to undertake dual functions chairing Looked After Children reviews and/or Child Protection Conferences, however since March 2020 a decision was made to manage both functions as related but separate teams. This decision was made to assist with scheduling, which has also helped increase the number of reviews that the team is able to undertake.

The Independent Reviewing Officers are all experienced social workers, however some additional agency cover has been required to support staff maternity, some sickness and additional demand related to a large increase in Child Protection as well as children Looked After. Whilst the number of children Looked After has fluctuated over the last year, there has been an increase from 972 in January 2020 children to 986 currently and went over 1000 at one point in early July 2021. The team is stable with a good skills mix. Prior to the pandemic, the team was already mostly agile as meetings and reviews took place in the community and most staff worked from home to complete paperwork for efficiency. As such, the team was already used to home based working. Working from home for extended periods has affected everyone's wellbeing, particularly as most staff across all services have had additional responsibilities (such as child care), however the team have supported each other well.

The rise in children the Safeguarding and Reviewing service is responsible for reviewing has meant that caseloads have risen. There have been some temporary increases in staffing, but it has meant that there is insufficient management capacity, with only one manager for 18 staff across Child Protection and Looked After. A review of the service is underway to consider the staffing and expanding the management arrangements. Average caseloads for each staff member is approximately 95-100 children, a rise from approximately 90 in January 2020. The recommended maximum is between 65-75. This has meant that there is less available time for IRO's to monitor and track each child. Whilst undertaking reviews virtually can have challenges, there are significant time savings for staff, particularly when commuting to out of county placements. This has meant that they have had more time to monitor and review plans, talk to children and families, albeit with the limitations of not being able to undertake

visits and meetings face to face. With restrictions easing, the service is looking at what work can continue to take place virtually and when face to face meetings and visits have to be prioritised.

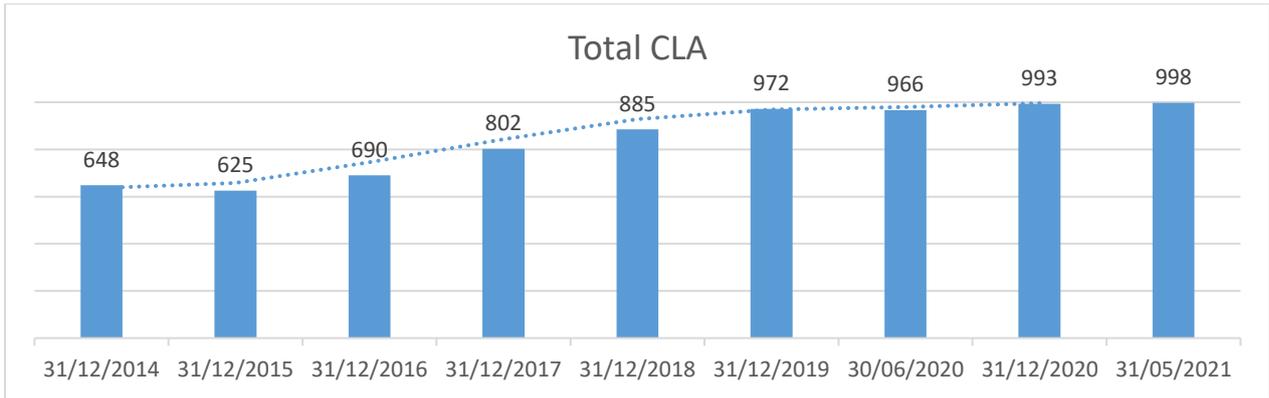
Frequency of Reviews

As outlined above within the updated legislation, guidance and case law, there is a duty for the IRO to continually monitor the child's plan and particularly where there are issues of concern or drift. Where there are issues or concerns there is a need to robustly challenge the plan. In practice, this means that there is significant work that the IRO needs to do on a frequent basis to ensure that they remain in contact with the child's social worker, reviewing the child's records and monitoring the progress of the plan. A key focus for the IRO is in determining what the child's lived in experiences are like when reviewing their plans. This can be more difficult when done virtually, however the team are creative in finding ways to communicate with children, carers and their support networks to find out what is going on for children.

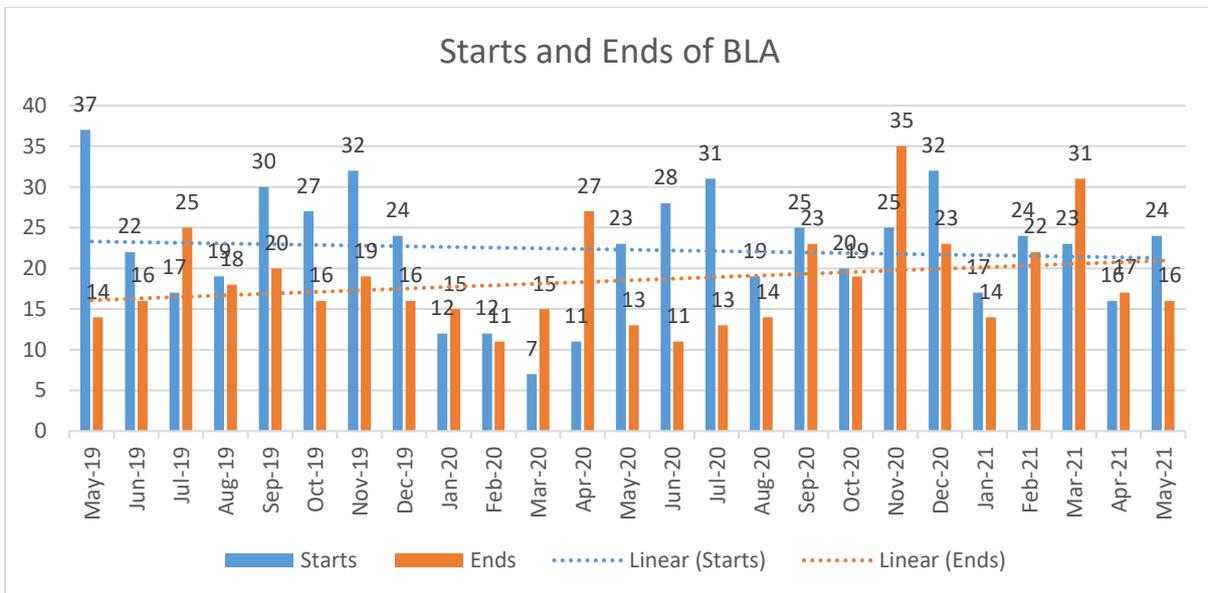
Performance in scheduling reviews has increased over the last year. 90% of all Looked After Reviews take place within necessary timescales and some children are reviewed much more regularly than the recommended timescales. Where the reviews are late, it is by a few days in almost all circumstances and usually because of scheduling difficulties or a change in worker. Monitoring and reviewing is however a continual process and not just limited to reviews. IRO's check in with children, carers, social workers and managers in between reviews. IRO's have introduced a midpoint monitoring review for many of their young people, to review where children's plans are and look at what needs to happen before their next review. This is not a statutory review, but good practice to help track progress.

Looked After Children Population:

At the time of writing, there were nearly 1000 children looked after by Cardiff Children's Services. At the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic, there was a slight reduction in the number of children looked after, however the numbers have gradually climbed. Whilst the numbers are very high, the increase in new 'starts of being looked after', have levelled off compared to previous years as can be seen from the charts below.

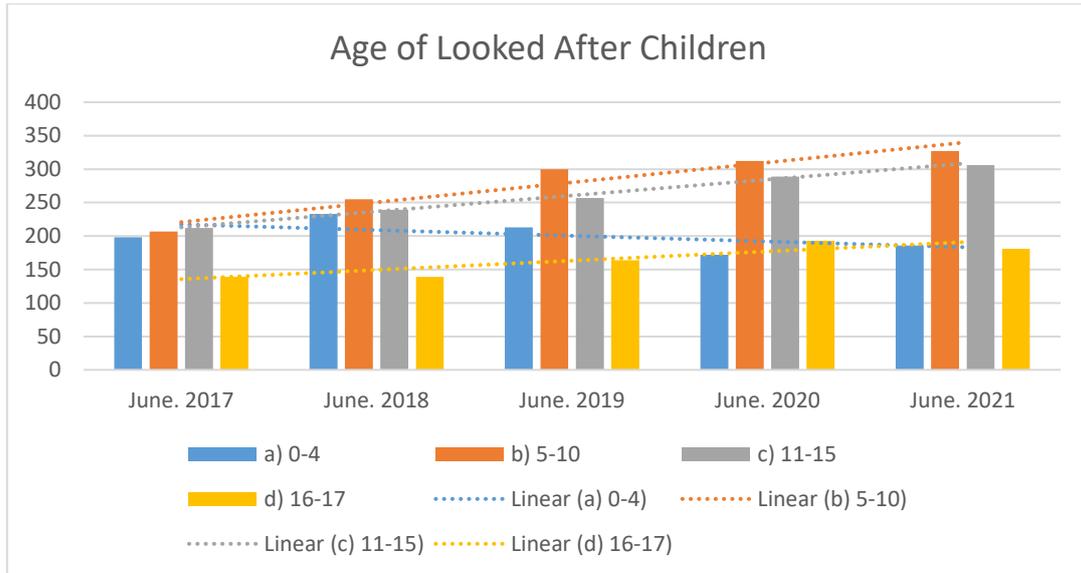


In recent years, there have been far more children becoming looked after than ceasing to be (e.g. returning home, adopted or turning 18). This trend has been slowly changing in recent years, which if it continues could start to see a decrease in looked after children.



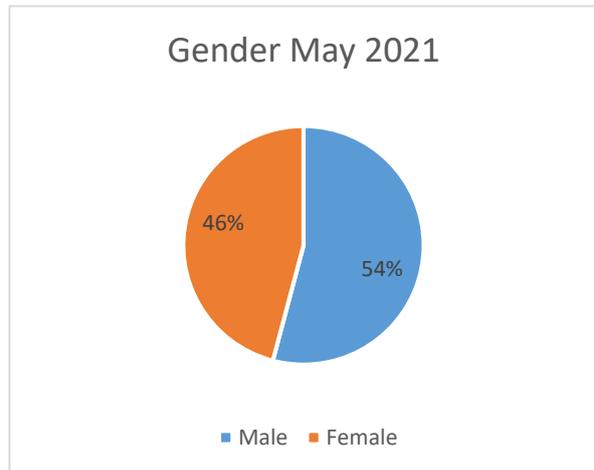
Ages of Looked After Children:

The average age of Looked After Children in Cardiff has changed over the last few years. In previous years there were a larger amount of children aged 0-4 years, however this age group has decreased relative to previous years (18.5%), whereas children aged 5-9 and 10-15 make up most of our Looked After population (32% and 31% respectively). The number of Care Leavers (16-17 year olds) remains similar to last year (18%), but is higher than in previous years. This could lead to a slight reduction in the overall numbers of Looked After Children when they leave care at 18. Children aged 5-15 continue to warrant particular attention as they will remain Looked for a considerable period of time and the numbers have increased.



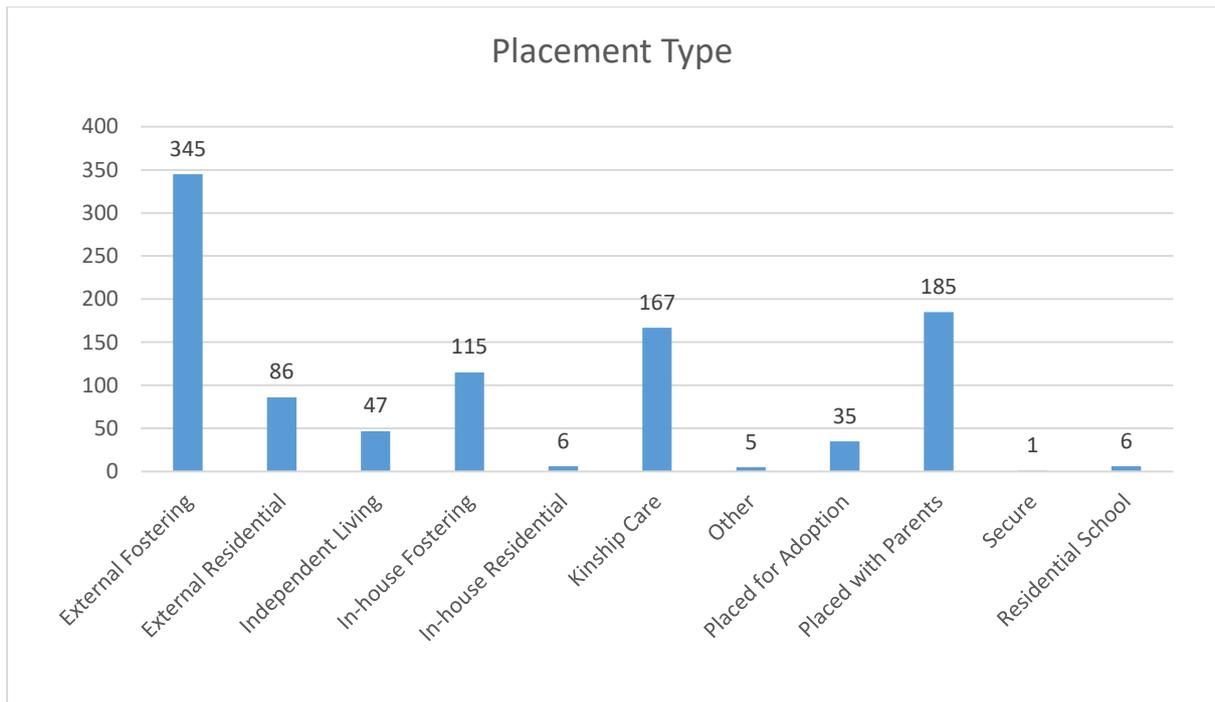
Gender:

There is a higher proportion of boys than girls, which has increased over the last year (51% were boys in the previous period). Some of this difference is related to unaccompanied asylum seeking children, the majority of which are male.

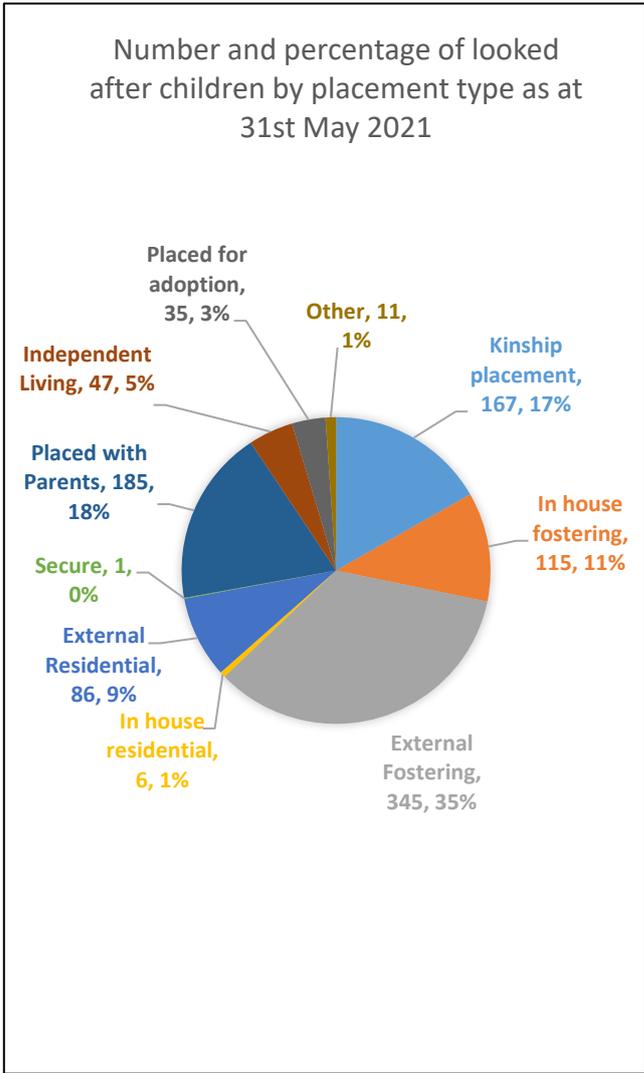
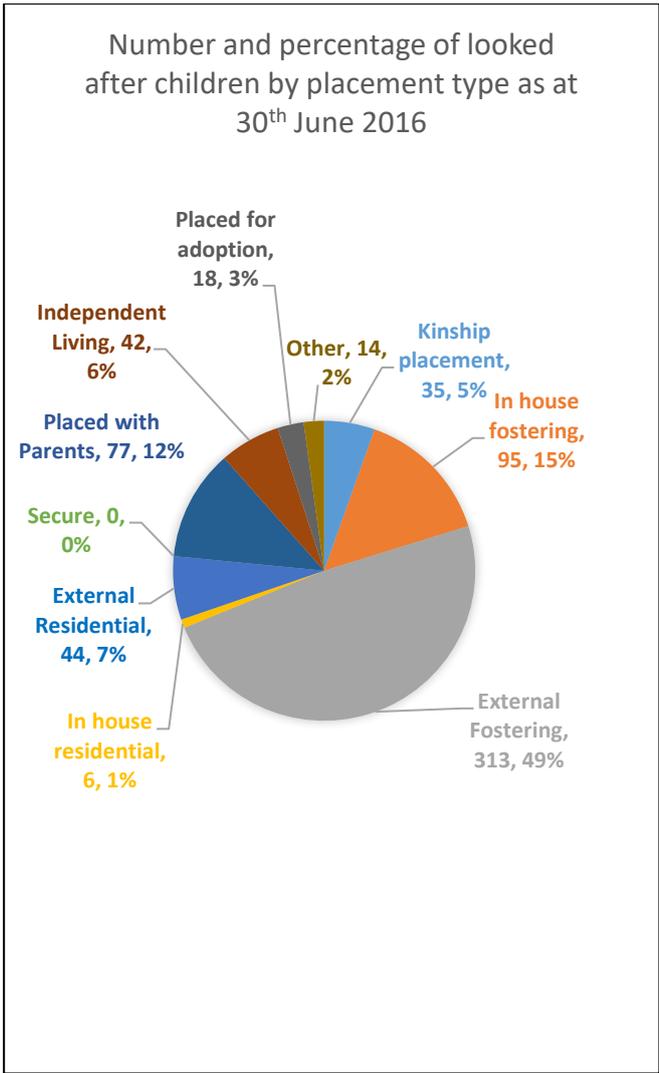


Placement Type:

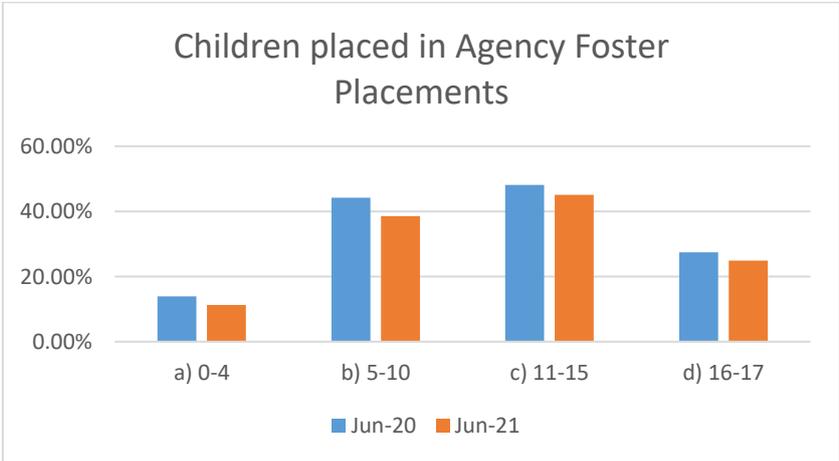
The majority of children looked After are placed in a foster placement, with 3 times as many children placed in agency foster placements as in house fostering.



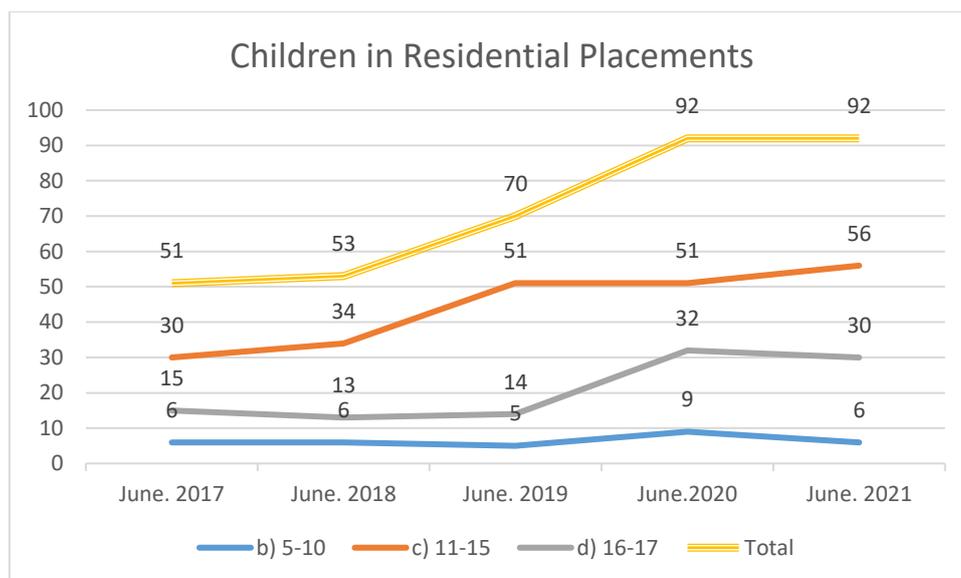
The chart above illustrates, in percentages and numbers, the placement types where our Looked After Children are residing. There has been a large increase in the number of children placed with their families (kinship foster care and Placement with Parents), which now makes up 35% of our Looked After population. The charts below outline the differences over time in the various placement types (comparing May 2021 against June 2016).



Whilst the percentage of children in an in house foster placement has reduced, the number of placements and children placed has actually increased. The Fostering Service is currently in the process of a restructure, which it is anticipated will assist in growing the number of in house placements. A national fostering service campaign is currently taking place, with plans to join up with other Welsh Local Authority fostering services to form a national brand. There has also been a decrease in children placed with agency foster placements across all age groups, as illustrated:



The number of children in a Residential Placement has increased in recent years, particularly when compared to 2016. A number of our Looked After Children have complex needs related to their early life experiences and Residential Placements play an important part in supporting their care plans. There is a shortage of foster placements however, and we know that there are a cohort of children who are placed in residential placements who could be better supported in a family placement. The following table illustrates the children in residential placements by age since 2017. Whilst the overall number is the same as last year, there has been an increase in 11-15 year olds.



A Residential Review project has been set up in the North Locality, with Operational Managers, Housing and the Reviewing Manager to closely review move on options for relevant young people that would benefit from moving on. Whilst early days, the project appears to be beneficial and could be extended to the East and South Localities. The Youth Gateway supports young people in finding housing and accommodation from as young as 16. Many young people require support, which these provisions are equipped to provide and supports transition to independence. Some of our young people require care as well as support and as such need to remain in a care arrangement (foster, residential or supported lodgings). The project is helping to explore and work with social workers in identifying the best move on plans for the young people.

Out of County Placements:

About a third of our Looked After Children are placed outside of Cardiff, with over half of these young people residing in an external foster placement. 18.5 % are placed with a parent or family member.

Placement	No.
Children's home outside LA boundary	66
Family Centre / Mother and Baby Unit	1
Foster placement with relative / friend outside LA	44
Foster placement with relative or friend outside LA	1

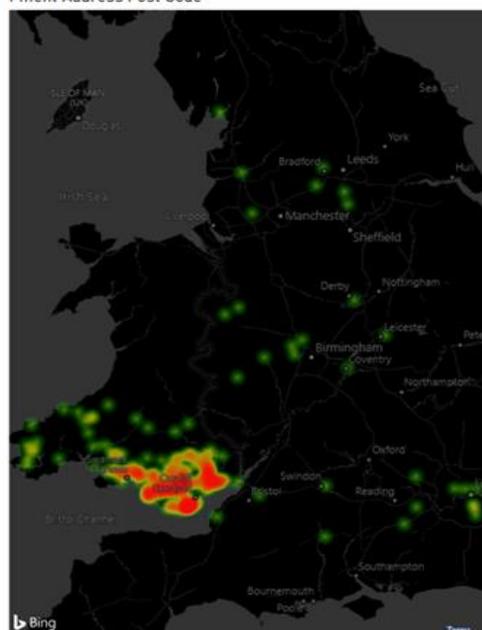
Independent living	3
NHS / Health Trust / medical or nursing care establishment	1
Other placement	1
Placed with foster carer provided by LA outside LA	12
Placed with parents / person with parental resp.	19
Placement with agency foster carer outside LA	187
Residential School	4
Secure unit outside Wales	1
YOI or Prison	1
Grand Total	341

The following heat map helps to show that most children are placed in Local Authority areas near to Cardiff.

Placements heat map by LA



Present Address Post Code



Children placed outside of the Cardiff area are reviewed at the 'Brighter Futures' panel, attended by Health, Education and Children's Services. These panels are held monthly, however there is a review of the panel currently to consider the frequency and how the panel can best operate.

Nearly 20% of the children placed outside of Cardiff are in a Residential home. These placements can often be a considerable distance from Cardiff. The Council is investing in additional residential provisions, including an assessment Centre, to reduce reliance on external provisions and enable more young people to remain living in Cardiff.

Education arrangements:

Cardiff Children's Services work closely with colleagues in Education to support our Looked After Children. There is a dedicated Looked After Children and Education [LACE] team situated in the Education directorate. There are strong links between the LACE and Childrens Services teams to track and support Looked After Children.

The education arrangements over the COVID 19 pandemic have been carefully reviewed. Looked After Children were classified as potentially ‘vulnerable’ children and were eligible for attendance at hub provisions when most schools were closed or had limited access. Where Looked After Children were supported to learn at home, they were provided with access to Chromebooks. A Joint (multi agency) Vulnerable Learners Panel was set up in the first lockdown to help monitor the arrangements for vulnerable learners. This panel has continued even though schools have subsequently reopened as it provides an excellent opportunity for multiagency discussions to support young people.

There was a reduction in the number of children experiencing a school move in the last year –

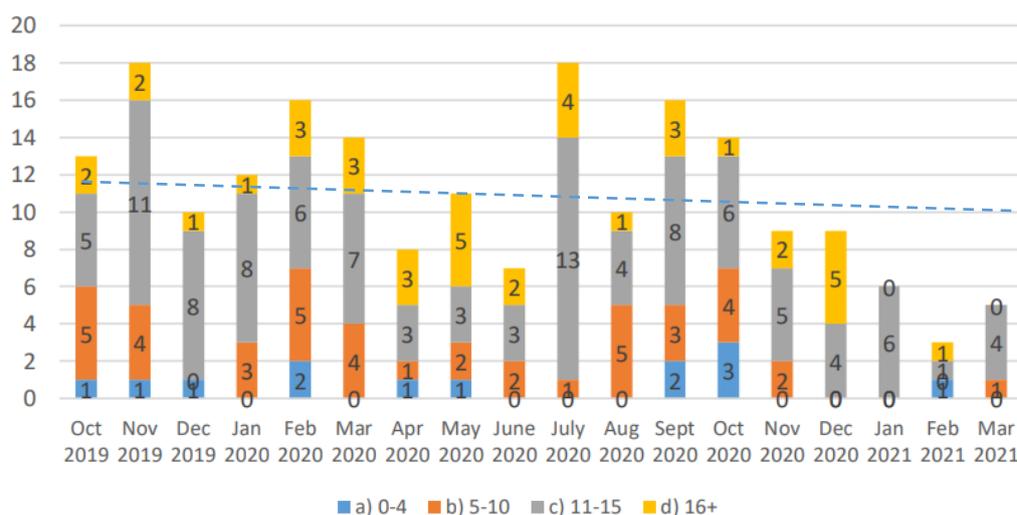
Move of school within year	
2018/19 (not calculated in 2019/20)	12.30%
2020/21	8.30%

The LACE team carefully track the education plans for all Looked After Children. 97% of all Looked After Child in School in Cardiff have an up to date Personal Education Plan to monitor their educational progress as a Looked After Child. We also know that 19% of Looked After children educated in Cardiff are subject of a Statement of Special Educational Need to support their learning.

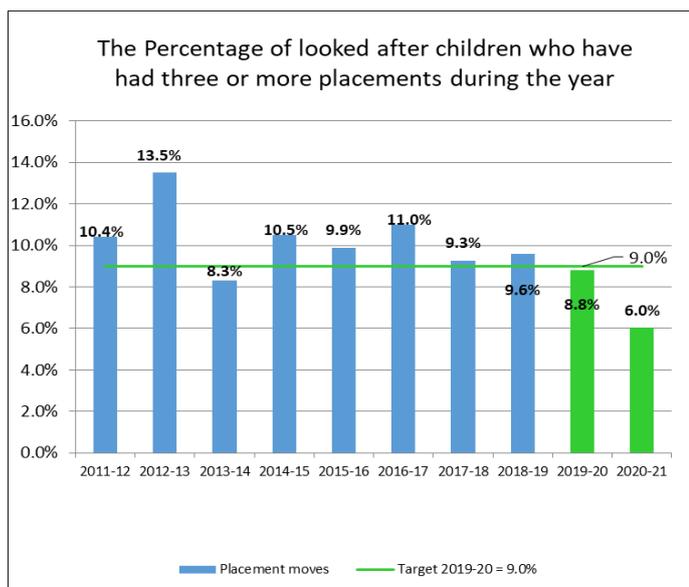
Unplanned Placement Moves

There has been a decrease in the number of unplanned moves over the last year. Unplanned moves can take place for a number of reasons, but are usually very disruptive for the young people involved. Children over the age of 11 are much more likely to have a placement disruption. It is really positive that there have not been as many disruptions in the last year (see chart below).

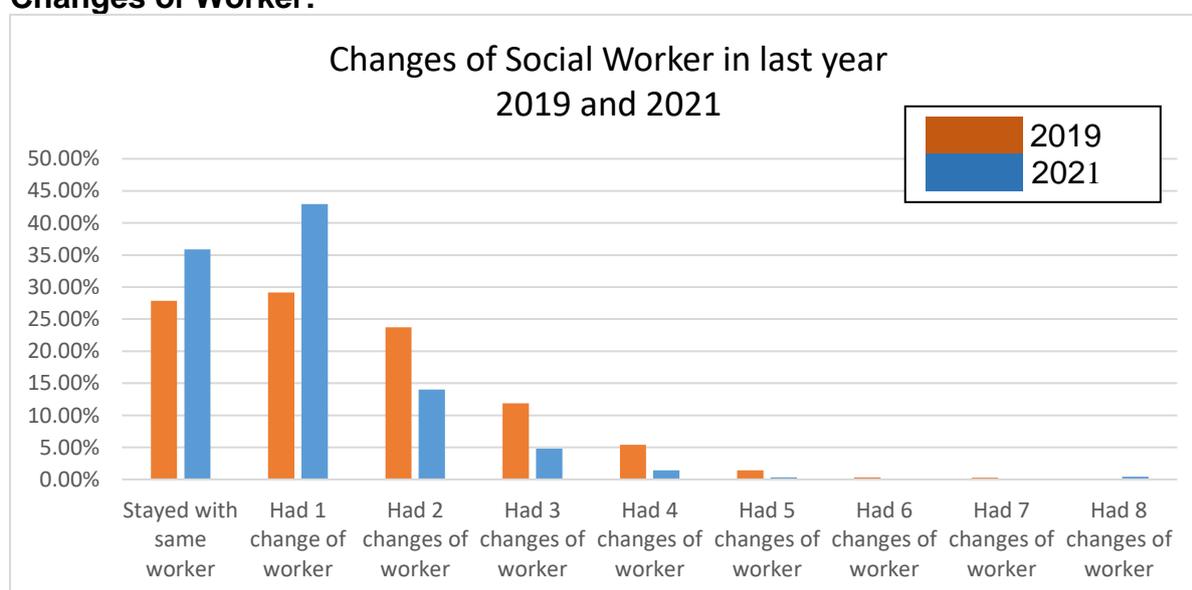
Unplanned Placement Moves by Age



The percentage of children that have had 3 or more placement moves over the last year has also reduced, which outlines that children are remaining in placements for longer.



Changes of Worker:



The figures above show that whilst some children have had a number of social workers, there has been a positive decrease in changes of workers children have had compared to 2019. Recruiting and retaining social workers is challenging for all Local Authorities as there is a national shortage. There has been significant recruitment and retention efforts made within Cardiff Children’s Services, which have reduced the changes of workers for children, even if the number of changes remain too high. There have been some children that have been without a social worker for a period. In June 2021 there were 28 children without an allocated social worker, which is a reduction from the 40 or so children in June 2020. The social work teams have been very active in identifying support workers for these children, with close management oversight and visits by duty social workers at the required times. The teams allocate the cases as quickly as possible, which means that children are usually not without a qualified worker for long. They also ensure that where there are any issues or concerns, children get allocated as a priority. The Independent Reviewing Officers role is vital in these circumstances in minimising drift. They are often the person that has had the

longest relationship with the child, young person or their family. Coordinating reviews in timescales is also more challenging when there are changes of worker.

Children placed for adoption between 01/01/20 - 31/12/20

Children Placed for Adoption					
	Jun-17	Jun-18	Jun-19	Jun-20	Jun-21
a) 0-4	22	23	38	22	31
b) 5-10	3	3	7	11	5
c) 11-15	0	0	1	0	0
Total	25	26	46	33	36

A total of 36 children were placed for adoption between May 2020 and June 2021. This is a slight increase on the previous year. The children placed were mostly young (0-4 years). During the first lockdown in the COVID 19 pandemic, adoption introductions were interrupted for a short period as services adjusted to working virtually but have picked back up and the placement finding process is generally working well.

Placement with Parents

In June 2021 there were 185 children subject to a Care Order and living with their parents under Placement with Parent (PWP) Regulations. This is a 10% increase from January 2020. All of these children must be reviewed by an IRO in the same way as any other Looked After Child.

Cardiff has a much higher than average number of children subject to Placement with Parent Regulations. There is a significant amount of additional work in reviewing children placed at home with their parents, as by virtue of the Court Order, there are often considerable support needs. There is also an expectation that the Independent Reviewing Officer should review these children more closely.

There is a cohort of children who no longer require a Care Order, however it has traditionally been very difficult to discharge as it requires a Court application and significant assessment work. Children's Services have set up a PWP project, which involves the Children's Management Team (CMT), Reviewing Service and CAF/CASS to FastTrack applications. This is in its initial stages, but there is much clearer oversight of PWP plans.

Looked After Children Population

In addition to the areas outlined above, there are additional trends that are known:

- There has been a general population rise in Cardiff, which is set to continue.
- Increased complexity, with Looked After Children often requiring therapeutic plans and additional support in placements.
- 33 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Looked After Children.
- Large increase in children placed on the Child Protection Register since March 2020 (nearly double). It is considered that this increase is related to the COVID

19 pandemic and fact that children and young people have been at home, less visible and with few support services undertaking direct work. Increases in the children on the Child Protection Register now could lead to more children becoming Looked After at a later date if they are not successfully supported to remain at home.

- Children placed at home under PWP has continued to increase, but there are some signs that the number of new PWP will decrease. This is linked to a recent Judicial Review outlined above, which will likely promote future reduction in PWP.
- Early Help - Cardiff Council has continued to invest and support Early Help Services to provide support to children and families without the need for formal Children's Services intervention.
- Adolescent Resource Centre- A coordinated effort is also being made to support all children at the edge of care into the Rapid Response and ARC as a means of preventing the child from ending up in the formal care process. There are currently 67 children receiving support from the ARC, which is an increase from 48 in January 2020. These are children that could otherwise be permanently looked after.
- Rise in adolescent Looked After Children linked to criminal exploitation- SAFE strategy is being developed to identify, assess and support all children who might be at risk of exploitation. The strategy utilises a contextual safeguarding approach linking up all relevant agencies in the Local Authority and partner agencies including, but not limited to Health and the Police.

IRO Resolution of Problems and Auditing

The Independent Reviewing Officer has an important duty in monitoring individual cases and checking children's plans. A key feature of the IRO role is that they should provide an independent perspective uninfluenced by managerial or resource pressures of the Local Authority. The IRO service provides robust challenge to social work teams regarding cases that have gone into drift or where the quality of care planning is not good enough. The IRO's are employees of the council and there is a delicate balance required by all Local Authorities to ensure that the IRO's remain impartial.

The Local Authority has an active Dispute Resolution Protocol (DRP) in place. This enables issues to be addressed via a formalised document that is retained and responded to within the Carefirst system. These comments on good practice and concerns are looked at and used to evaluate practice, policies and procedures. Following a Looked After review the IRO completes documentation that outlines whether a child's care plan is effective in meeting their needs. Where there are general low level issues of concern, this gets reported and the social worker/team manager are asked to respond and address these issues. Where there are more serious issues, the Protocol is raised as described above.

The key issues that get raised or escalated are:

- Care and Support plans not being updated in a timely manner.
- Drift in Care Planning – related to a service, resource, assessment not being progressed in an agreed timescales.

- Move on plan not being progressed in a timely manner.
- Disputes about allowances- Some foster carers would like to commit to children and young people via Special Guardianship Order, but require a long term payment to match their fostering allowance. The national guidance on this appears to discourage long term payment and independent legal advice on this is being considered by the IRO service.
- Twice as many reports of 'good' practice get reported, which is encouraging.

Occasionally, this challenge has met with some resistance from social workers or managers. Where matters have not been resolved satisfactorily they will then be escalated to an Operational Manager and then Director for consideration and resolution. Ultimately a referral can be made directly to CAFCASS if the IRO cannot seek resolution, however this is rare. The escalation process is currently being reviewed to shorten timescales for responding and resolving issues. The new process will also enable the service to more closely resolve issues.

Pathway Plans

IRO's also chair pathway plan reviews for Young People from age 16 to 17 years who are due to leave care at 18. They also review pathway plans for 'eligible' care leavers up to the age of 21 or 25 if in full time education. Reviews now also take place regularly for Young Adults 18+ years in response to "When I'm Ready" for Young Adults who want to remain in their foster placement or continue in full time education or training. Many young people however do not wish to have a review when they are over the age of 18. Where this is the case the IRO tries to ensure that the young person has made an informed choice and offers the young person advice about how to get in touch with the IRO in the future if they wish to change their mind. The arrangements for Pathway plans for Care Leavers (18+) are being reviewed with consideration as to how we can successfully support these young people in their transition into adulthood.

Consultation with children and young people

IRO's are encouraged to meet with a child or young person before each review and where appropriate between reviews for an 'IRO visit'. During the reviewing process the IRO ensures that the wishes and feelings of the child/young person are sought, and they are encouraged to participate in their review. Parents and foster carers are able to contribute to the review process, and also ensure that younger children also have an opportunity to discuss their feelings about the reviewing process and their experiences in foster care.

This has presented some challenges over the COVID 19 pandemic as meetings, visits and conversations with young people needed to be done virtually. What we have found is that many young people are very experienced in using a device and actually preferred to communicate via video. This isn't the case for all young people and some IRO visits and reviews have been face to face, where government guidance allowed. As a service we are looking to the future and assessing which meetings, reviews and consultations can take place virtually and what needs to be face to face. It is likely that

we will take a blended approach and will look at what works best for each child and family.

A good practice recording template, referred to in the previous IRO report, has been designed to be used when IRO's are visiting children and young people. This will start to be used next year when our new recording system Eclipse is launched.

All young people are also supported to access independent advocacy via NYAS. All young people have had the opportunity to meet with an advocate to explain their role and know how to access this service. IROs also support young people to access this service where appropriate.

Children and Young people are currently sent consultation forms prior to each Looked After Review. Not all young people want to fill in these consultation forms and they see them as old fashioned. Instead Cardiff Children's Services have invested in a purpose designed app, Mind of My Own, which specialises in supporting and enabling young people to communicate in a way that supports them and at a time that suits. All Looked After Children in Cardiff will have access to this. The portal software also allows us to have an overview of the information that children have provided to the organisation. This will help to support decision making at an individual, service or corporate level.

Some of the main issues and themes that children and young people have shared with their IRO include:

- Positive feedback about their worker, placement or carer.
- Recent achievements in sitting their school exams.
- Disappointment when they have a change of worker and need to tell 'their story' to a new worker- *It is positive that changes of workers have decreased, but it remains too high.*
- Lockdown - *the COVID 19 pandemic has been hard for most children, but it has been particularly difficult for some of our looked after children as it can increase feelings instability and insecurity. Others have benefited from more one to one time with their carers and educators (where they have attended hub provisions)*
- When they are not allowed to see their family- *face to face contact arrangements have been affected due to COVID 19 regulation. Virtual contact has been promoted, but some children and young people have struggled with this. All contact is now face to face.*
- Changes of school or placement – *a disruption of any type is very difficult for a child. The number of disruptions has decreased in the last year.*

Next Steps:

- Promote the participation and engagement of children and young people within their Looked After Reviews and through the implementation of the Mind of My Own platform.
- Review of the staffing, management arrangements and function of the Safeguarding and Reviewing Service, with a view to creating a Reviewing Hub.
- Improve the quality and consistency of Care and Support Plans to reflect outcome based care planning.

- Closely review the plans for children placed at home under PWP to consider support or progress plans to discharge Care Order
- Eclipse Project – this is provisionally scheduled to become operational in April 2022. IRO's have played a key part in developing new processes, forms and systems based on best practice.
- Work with other directorates to implement SAFE model.
- Work with the reunification project to identify and closely monitor those children where reunification is possible.
- Work with Residential Pilots to monitor and offer additional scrutinise
- Review and update IRO escalation procedures, so that where there are issues of concern or drift they are consistently raised in a timely way. Also so that issues can be more closely tracked and monitored.
- Review of virtual and face to face reviews/visits, to develop a hybrid blended model for reviewing.
- Transitional Services – Reorganisation of IRO/CLA Reviews for Care Leavers with enhanced emphasis on future planning for young people