

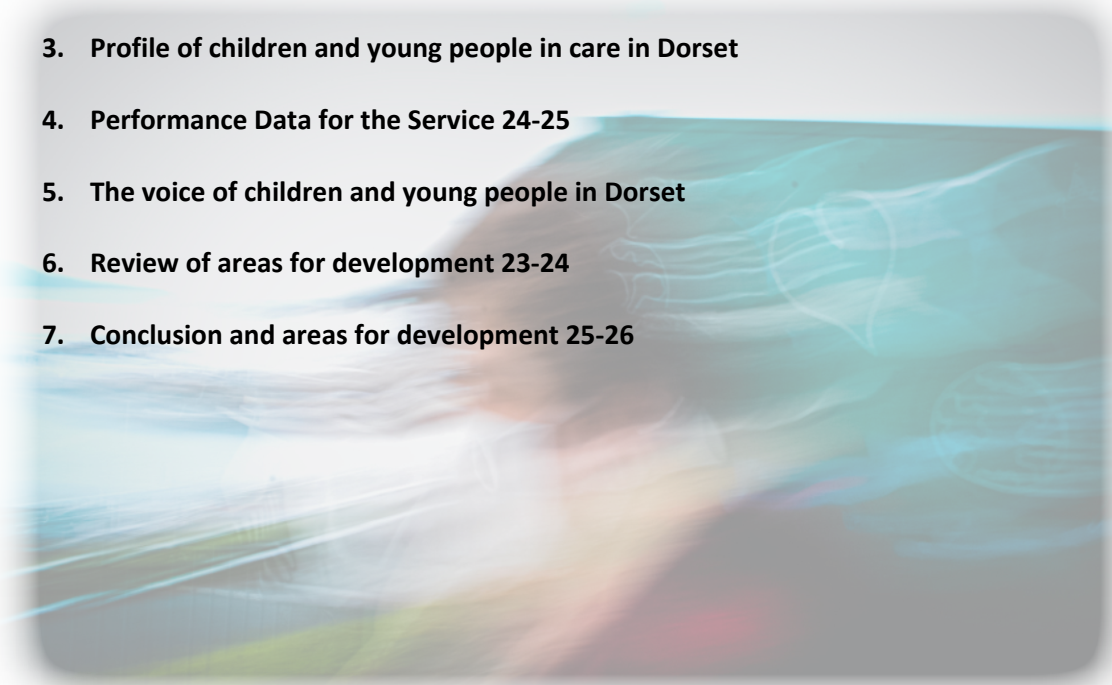


Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2024/2025

***The contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers
to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for
Children in Care.***

**Toni Colledge, Quality Assurance Service Manager
September 2025**

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Artist credit: '*Loneliness*' by Kieran, Youth Voice Network Member and Expert by Experience

1. Introduction

To ensure that our service continues to be effective and ambitious for children in our care, it is important that we provide an annual report that sets out our progress. This annual report provides both quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer (QARO) Service in Dorset Council, as set out in the IRO Handbook. In Dorset, QAROs undertake the statutory function of the IRO for children in our Care. This annual report covers the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

The report evidences a service which continues to develop and provides good quality work to support children being well cared for and achieving good outcomes. The report includes key information outlining the work of the service with and for children in care and the report includes examples of IRO work with children.

The IROs continue to maintain a collaborative approach to working which enables them to work alongside our Corporate Parenting Board, our Children in Care Youth Voice team, and the Dorset Safeguarding Partnership. Our work continues to model a relational approach based on the principles of 'High Challenge and High Support' and builds upon the values and aims of Dorset Council, and the 'Dorset Children Thrive' model.

The IROs relational approach continues as this is most effective in improving the experiences and outcomes for our children in care and is supported through the structures of statutory reviews, recommendations, and informal and formal escalations.

Through a range of Quality Assurance (QA) activities and performance management tools the service contributes towards effective and timely care planning for Children in Care. This report will provide an overview of performance data, the extent of young people's participation, the profile of our children in care, and details of the 'dispute resolution' process and its effectiveness. The report concludes with a review of progress of the aims and objectives set out in the last annual report and aims and objectives for the service for the upcoming year.

The government programme 'Stable Homes Built on Love' has now been embedded in Dorset via the Families First for Children Pathfinder. IROs have a key role in the oversight and success of family-led solutions and promoting the contribution of family networks to the plans for children. This approach enables more children to be cared for in their family networks, with the right support from professionals. This will be further refined following the government updates published in November 2024, and March 2025.

Dorset Council's Children's Services were inspected by Ofsted in March 2025 and received an 'outstanding' judgement. The work of the IRO service is proud to have contributed to the result that 'The experiences and progress of children in care' was judged as 'outstanding'. Specifically, it was noted that:

'Children are encouraged to attend their review meetings, and often do so, or they are supported by advocates or an independent visitor to provide their views. This involvement ensures that children are active participants in the care planning process'

The report also noted the role of IROs for children living in unregistered children's homes *'ensur(ing) that children living in such homes are helped to be protected'*.

Further verbal feedback from inspectors during the inspection commended the role of the IRO service in supporting permanence planning, including the introduction of IRO progress checks and escalation tracking meetings.

94% of children in care reviews are held in time, over 90% of recommendations are completed within 5 working days, and participation rates are high. The number of children having contact with their IRO is high and escalations continue to be part of the culture where the service to children needs to be improved.

Alongside all statutory areas of focus, this year IROs have continued to focus on supporting better planning for young people in care turning 18, permanence planning as a whole and promoting the child's voice.

2. The IRO service for Children in Care in Dorset

The IRO service is now made up of 10 IROs, 5 full time and 5 part time. There is a mix of genders and a range of background experience including Child Protection, Adoption, Fostering, Permanence Teams, Probation, CAFCASS, and including Frontline Management and Service Management. IROs have also developed areas of specialist interest such as children with disabilities and asylum-seeking young people. The team is not split into specialisms, which maintains versatility, broad knowledge and experience across the whole team. However, if required, it is possible to allocate an IRO with specialist knowledge or interest, or an IRO of a specific gender if needed/requested.

The ethnic diversity in the team is low, although it is comparable to the population in Dorset. However, we do have White European ethnicities represented. Different sexualities are also represented in the team.

The team has remained stable throughout the year with one IRO moving on to a management role in the Care Leavers Service in Dorset, and another sadly passing away. The Service Manager has remained in post since May 2023.

Caseloads for IROs are between 50-60 (full time equivalent) and include a significant amount of travel due to the number of children placed out of county. We aim to keep sibling groups with the same IRO where possible to aid consistency and understanding of the whole family picture and history, as well as having less professionals for a family to have to link with. If a child comes back into care for some reason, we endeavour to assign the same IRO again for consistency, reflection and learning. If a young person requests a different IRO, we are happy to respect their wishes.

IROs in Dorset have access to independent legal advice through a reciprocal arrangement with a neighbouring Local Authority and this has been used well this year.

Working with other teams

Dorset has a locality-based model for Children in Care and in 2024 a Permanence Service Manager role was created, whilst the teams remained linked to their locality through matrix management. This has enabled a greater focus on the specific and unique needs of children in care and greater consistency. We have 'link IROs' including the Birth to Settled Adulthood Service, the Care Leavers Service and the Asylum-Seeking Young People service. Escalation tracking meetings between the IRO Service Manager and Locality Service Managers continue to improve relationships and working

together between the different parts of the service. The IRO Service Manager promotes understanding of the role through extended CSLT meetings, panel/oversight meetings and project work related to children in care, including working closely with the Principal Social Worker and Practice Leads.

IROs regularly attend Permanence Planning Meetings, Stability Meetings, Extra Familial Harm, (contextual safeguarding) meetings and other decision-making forums for their children.

Quality Assurance role

Dorset has adopted the name 'Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer' for IROs to reflect the responsibilities around Quality Assurance work. The team sits within the Quality Assurance and Partnerships service, under a Quality Assurance Service Manager. The team complete monthly audits across a range of practice areas, and thematic dip samples in areas of focus for children in care, for example as raised through Corporate Parenting Board and the Priority areas of the Corporate Parenting Board delivery plan.

Quality Assurance work is also completed monthly by the Service Manager, including additional thematic audits, quarterly escalation reports and contributions to our 'Good and Better Board', which celebrates good practice.

IROs complete monitoring forms at each review which identifies quantitative data around relevant issues, for example, participation, whether children's views are represented, completion of plans, whether appropriate meetings are taking place (for example Permanence Planning Meetings) and gives an overall grading (in line with Ofsted grading). This contributes to senior management oversight, preventing or addressing drift and delay, and overall performance management.

The Quality Assurance and Partnership Service, which the IRO service is part of, includes a focus on 'closing the loop' in terms of learning from audits and feedback. It is achieved in collaboration with the Principal Social Worker, colleagues in Practice, Policy and Procedures and Workforce Development who sit within the partnership.

Supervision and training

Supervision for IROs takes place regularly and covers personal, performance and practice issues. We have continued to have face to face team meetings with guests/visitors from partner teams and agencies to develop stronger relationships and up to date knowledge about development in other service areas. Our annual Team Development Day has been held in February 25. This included peer audits, inspection preparation, reviewing our practice standards and escalation policy, and sharing and recognising good practice in the team.

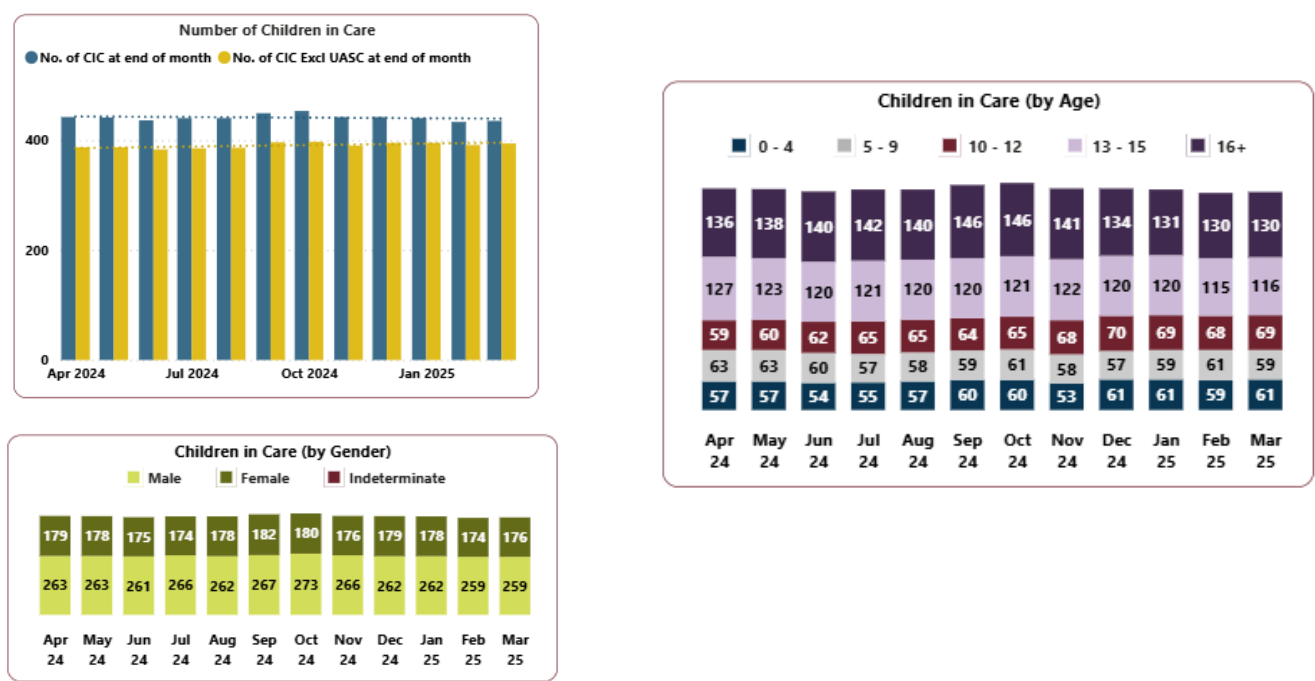
Training for IROs is available through the council training programme and IROs have been provided with a range of training opportunities throughout the year including: The National Supporting Refugees and Asylum Seekers Conference; Safe and Settled Care Learning Event; Violence Against Women and Girl workshops; Shame Competence Training, Restorative Practice, Mind of My Own, Re-imagining Foster Care, How trauma affects the body: the psychosomatic nature of trauma, Nitazens (Substance Misuse) with Dr Mindy Bartlett; NAIRO training for new IROs.

The Clifton Strengths coaching is also being implemented in Dorset and new IROs have completed the assessment as part of their induction. A more in depth exercise is planned for a team building day later in 2025.

Regional and National links have been maintained and strengthened, and the IRO CPD event in July 2024 was well received and well attended by Dorset IROs. This will be repeated in September 2025 with the Dorset IRO Service Manager leading a workshop and sharing the voices of care experienced young people from Dorset.

The ‘Mind of My Own’ app has been adopted by the service as the default method of consulting with young people prior to reviews. This has been very successful for reviews and as a way of encouraging young people to share their views at other times, for example during IRO visits. One member of the team is currently the ‘top user’, and her practice and experience has been used to promote the app to other teams. Mind of My Own has a version for young children and those with learning needs, and an in-built translation function, which is very valuable for young people where English is not their first language, or they are unable to speak English. The IRO Service Manager is part of the project team working to increase the usage across all of Children’s Services.

3. Profile of children in care in Dorset



Children in Care (by Ethnicity)	Apr 24	May 24	Jun 24	Jul 24	Aug 24	Sep 24	Oct 24	Nov 24	Dec 24	Jan 25	Feb 25	Mar 25
White	344	343	339	342	343	350	345	341	345	349	345	347
Asian	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Black	17	17	19	20	21	21	21	20	18	18	16	16
Mixed White and Asian	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	2	2	2	3	3
Mixed White and Black	10	10	10	10	10	10	15	15	15	15	15	16
Mixed other	14	15	15	15	15	17	18	17	17	17	16	16
Other minority												
Non-white British (%)	26	26	26	26	26	26	28	27	26	24	24	24
Non-white British (Number)	115	114	113	114	115	118	127	120	113	107	104	104

The table above shows the overall numbers of children in care have decreased over the period of this report. However, the decrease is due to the reduced number of children in care seeking asylum, transferred to Dorset through the National Transfer scheme (55 to 41). This decrease is due to the NTS not requesting young people transfer to Dorset, as we are keen to welcome them at any time. The number of children in care excluding asylum seeking children has increased from 387 to 394. This increase is an area for focus in 2025 for the Care and Protection Service, and the IRO service will support where required to understand why the numbers are increasing and what can be done to address this. There is a noticeable decrease in number of adolescents in care, which is only partly accounted for by the decrease in asylum seeking young people, and is positive. There is a slight increase in boys coming into care, and ethnicity data remains similar, with a 2% drop in 'non-white British' the only notable difference.

4. Performance data for the service:

Number and Timeliness of Reviews, Recommendations and Minutes.

IROs in Dorset now all consistently write their minutes in the form of a letter to the child or young person, and some produce additional age-appropriate versions.

The total number of reviews completed this year is 1,251. Overall, the number of reviews completed in timescales is 93%. This has been consistent with every month this year being over 90% and finishing on a high of 100%. Some of the lateness shown on the performance charts is caused by delays in write ups which can mean the data is not captured in the report for the month. Other reasons have included illness or emergencies.

It is positive to see that the number of recommendations distributed within 5 days has continued to improve this year. The small percentage that are not can be due to 'split reviews' (where two separate meetings may be required for separated parents or birth family and prospective adoptive family), reviews that take place as a 'series of meetings' or staff sickness and absence.

It is disappointing that the number of minutes completed in 20 days has not improved, however the team have now started utilising AI more to help with meeting these targets dates, and several members of the team are regularly completing 100% of minutes within 20 days each month. It is hoped that this will show an improvement in 2025. High caseloads and extensive out of area travel are the main reasons for delayed write ups.

Ensuring the minutes are completed and distributed within the appropriate timescales of 20 working days is a continued priority area for improvement, which will require ongoing focus in 25 -26. There are specific actions in place to address the late completion of minutes within the team.

Annual figures

Task	Total number	Percentage	Comparison to 23-24
Child in care reviews that took place	1251		-29
Child in care reviews that took place within timescales (not including overdue reviews)	1172	94%	same
Child in care reviews with completed recommendations	1250	100%	same
Child in care reviews with completed recommendations within 5 working days	1143	91%	+3%
Child in care reviews with full review minutes completed	1138	91%	-1%
Child in care reviews with full minutes completed within 20 working days.	563	45%	-1%

Participation and advocacy

Participation levels for reviews remain consistently high with a year total of 93%. This year we co-produced some 'Ground-rules for Meetings' with the Youth Voice Network because of feedback from them about how we could increase participation. These are now shared with attendees as part of the invite. 'Mind of My Own' is also now being used to help young people share their views more easily and we are seeing it used regularly.



If you attend one of my meetings, please follow these rules.
This will make it a safe place for me and means that I will be able to take part more easily.

	Talk to me not about me.
	If you need to arrive late or leave early, let me know before the meeting starts.
	Do not forward the invite or invite anyone new without checking with me first. I should know who is going to be there.
	There may be things I only wish to discuss one to one and may be embarrassing to discuss in a group. Please check with me or my IRO beforehand so that you respect my privacy.
	Use kind language, that everyone can understand

A new feedback form is sent out after each review which provides feedback on the meeting itself, asking attendees their views on the number of people attending, was it the right people, how well they understood what was said, and were the right things discussed. We have begun to receive feedback from young people, family, foster carers and professionals, which will help us continue to improve.

Children are encouraged to participate in a way that feels comfortable for them. This could be sharing their views, wishes and feelings 1:1 with their IRO, the use of an advocate to represent their views, attending their review and joining the discussion or in some cases, chairing their own review.

Use of advocates for reviews has improved, with 29% of children (175) represented by an advocate at their review in between Oct 24- March 25. However, most children and young people consistently tell us they would prefer an existing trusted adult (for example foster carer) to speak on their behalf or to speak for themselves. A workshop to support better collaboration between Independent Advocates and IROs was delayed this year due to other demands and the Advocacy Manager post being vacant, however this post has now been filled and there are plans to deliver it in 2025. This will look to increase the use of advocates to support young people to resolve issues of concern between reviews, and not just to represent their views at the meeting. The Service Manager is part of the contract monitoring group for advocacy and meets monthly with the new manager to improve how advocacy works for children in care in Dorset.

Consultation questionnaires are sent out via an online form prior to every review, and are sent to parents, carers, other family members and professionals. The feedback forms have been improved this year and the IROs are finding this helpful. These cover a range of areas including relationships, emotional wellbeing, health, education, family time, information sharing, and offer the space to add requests or recommendations and help the IRO to prepare for the review and understand the perspectives of those involved in the child's life prior to the meeting so they can make sure it is as meaningful and useful as possible and all important points are covered.

IRO contact and relationships with children and young people

IRO contacts on 31 st March 2025	
All Children in Care	439
Percentage of all Children in Care who have had an IRO contact in the last 6 months	91%
Those in placements where a contact is expected to take place	427
Percentage of those above, who have had an IRO contact in the last 6 months	94%

For the first half of the year (April 23 – September 23) 96% of children expected to have contact with their IRO over the previous 6 months did so. This is likely to reflect the increased opportunity for visiting over the school holidays. This indicates a consistent picture, and positive relationships between the IRO and their children is something the team are rightly proud of.

Contact is tailored to the young person's needs wishes and feelings. Young people who are more vulnerable or who have a particularly strong relationship with their IRO having more. Between September 2024 and March 2025 71% of children had more than one contact with their IRO (313 out of 439) and 31 of these children had 5 or more contacts with their IRO.

'Contact' in this context includes in person visits, telephone calls, text conversations and cards. IROs in Dorset use creative and individualised ways to build relationships with young people. This can include taking them for a milkshake or hot chocolate or doing an activity/playing a game.

Circumstances where a contact 'is not expected to take place' includes children 'placed for adoption' or children in a hospital setting. However, IROs in Dorset usually maintain contact with those children where appropriate.

Feedback from young people

I've had Anna about 4 years, she gets things done and if they don't she complains, which is great. (H, 18)

Kerry has been good to me, she's helped me with a lot of issues I needed help with, she is nice and calm. A bit too cheerful, ha ha, just kidding! (J. 17)

She got everything done as she gave the social deadlines, she was the main one who got things done. The meetings were ok, she talked to me afterwards to make sure I was ok (A, 15)

Feedback from foster carers:

We are grateful for Glen's support over the years with this young person and his older brother
(foster carer)

Dear Iain, thank you so much for being such a kind advocate for the boys. Grateful to have you! (Dorset foster carer)

help and we have long conversations about the best arrangements (Kinship foster carer)

Feedback from Social Workers:

"Just wanted to feedback about how Glen managed a challenging CiC Review recently. I felt that Glen was outstanding in being able to focus the meeting on the children and their needs, whilst showing value to each of the parents' position and giving them sufficient opportunity to share these. I felt the meeting was drawn together with some clear and realistic actions and that each member of the meeting left feeling heard."

"I would like to share my experience of Anna, she is a fierce advocate for all our children, she does exactly what her job role says on the tin (independent)! Anna is knowledgeable, passionate and child/young person centred"

Pa

Debbie's calmness kindness and consistency have made a huge difference for C. C's Foster carer always highlights the hard work of Debbie and how important she

Feedback from parents/family members:

Anna has been really the only stable person throughout our whole involvement; she has always been fair and thorough in the meetings. She will speak up if things aren't being done, or she feels they are not in the best interests of the children. If I've had problems getting hold of social services and Anna is straight onto it, she has been brilliant. (mum)

She has been quite consistent for us, the only person who hasn't changed. She always seems really positive; she met me and my mum and was positive about what we had done. She is always pleasant, kind and helpful. (mum)

She has been fantastic, she always seems to go above and beyond, very prompt, clear and concise. Doesn't pull her punches but we have appreciated that, as we know where we stand and she has helped our family immensely, it was like having another member of the family there. Also how caring she is towards (the children) and put things in ways they understand. (grandad)

What care experienced young people have told us, via Youth Voice, is that they do not like being asked repeatedly for feedback by lots of different adults, they feel they must repeat themselves and often don't get to hear if anything has changed as a result.

We continue to strengthen the relationship the new Youth Voice Network and a team of care experienced young people who have said they wish to give feedback. In June 2024 members of the Network did a 'takeover' of the IRO team meeting. They gave their views on how we could make child in care reviews more welcoming for young people and what things they would like us to challenge on their behalf. This led to further workshops with the network about how to make Child in Care Reviews more comfortable and child focussed, and the impact of delays in decision making for them on day to day matters. Feedback on both these have been taken forward, with the 'Ground Rules for Meetings' being developed and work on 'Delegated Authority' to be progressed later in 2025.

As mentioned above a new feedback form was introduced this year, and launched in January 2025, taking into consideration the things young people had raised at this meeting, such as whether there were the right people at the meeting and if they understood what was being said. It also asks question about what the IRO does well and what they could do better (multiple choice with a free text option). In direct response to feedback from Youth Voice we have allowed this to be completed anonymously so that young people are more likely to tell us how we can improve. It is being used regularly, with 8 responses received up to the end of March 25 from a range of respondents. The 2 young people who have responded so far have given positive feedback ticking that their IRO listens, cares, does what they say they will, and gets things done; that the meeting was the right amount of people, included the right things. One young person shared that they did not understand all of the meeting and this is helpful feedback to take forward for that IRO.

Dispute resolution (escalations)

Dispute resolution continues to be achieved with a variety of approaches and tools which IROs can draw from according to the situation. Issues are raised in conversation, at meetings, set out in formal recommendations at reviews, and IRO progress checks. If these do not achieve the outcome required for the child then they can use 'pre-escalations', informal escalations, formal escalations of varying levels, and/or escalation resolution meetings. The ethos is one of high support, high challenge and the expectation on the IRO is to approach issues with balanced and strengths-based communication, looking for solutions and with a focus on the outcome for the child. They should be a safety net and tool for learning and improvement, not a criticism of individuals, teams or practice.

The Service Manager has produced quarterly reports to share and analyse the escalation data and make improvements to the process. These are shared with operational managers in our Quality of Practice Action Group and demonstrate a developing and effective approach.

Pre-escalations:

The pre-escalation tool has continued to be used well this year, as a way of capturing the informal challenge that IROs provide on a day to day basis before raising more formal escalations with managers. The overall number has increased by 36 this year.

Pre-escalation type	Number of Children	Number of Notes
QARO Pre-escalation: Care/Pathway Plan missing or out of date	53	59
QARO Pre-escalation: Child's journey not reflected on the file	75	102
QARO Pre-escalation: Child's voice not being heard	27	30
QARO Pre-escalation: Education (incl. SEND)	10	11
QARO Pre-escalation: Family contact	2	2
QARO Pre-escalation: Health	7	9
QARO Pre-escalation: Permanence/transitions	55	67
Total	168	280

This report shows that the IROs have continued to focus on planning for young people turning 18 and permanence planning, with many of the pre-escalations being in relation to ensuring Pathway Plans are completed when young people turn 16 and are then updated as they approach 18. Others focus on Permanence Plans being completed and updated, and plans being progressed to achieve long term matching with foster carers, as well as ensuring plans are in place for when children turn 18.

The 'child's journey not reflected on the file' category refers to missing documents, 'chronology of significant events' not being updated and delays in recording visits. Care experienced people have told us how much they dislike having to repeat their story to new workers and how important it is that they can look back at their records and understand what happened and why. Keeping their records up to date and accurate is not only important for safety and sound decision making, but also respectful too.

The significant number of records relating to the 'child's voice not being heard' is evidence that the IROs fulfilling their duty to promote the child's voice as well as their best interests.

Informal and Formal escalations resolved.

Informal Escalation	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Totals
79 (-38)	52 (+14)	26 (+10)	8 (-2)	1 (-2)	0	166 (-22)

In the year 2024 – 2025 the overall numbers of escalations concluded has reduced. Noticeable changes this year are a decrease in informal escalations and increase in Stage 1 and 2 escalations. I would suggest this is most likely due to the greater use of the pre-escalation tool and therefore IROs moving straight to stage 1, where their pre-escalation has not achieved the outcome needed.

Consistent with last year, most escalations were resolved 'informally' with the Social Worker or Team Manager, and all were resolved before reaching Stage 5. No referrals needed to be made to

CAFCASS this year. This shows the benefit of the collaborative approach and strong relationships with the operational teams which enable issues to be resolved before reaching those stages, but also that IROs are confident and willing to escalate higher if required.

Area of focus	Escalations completed Apr 24 – March 25
Care plan / Pathway plan missing or out of date	7
Drift in Permanence Planning (including adoption and reunification)	21
Education/SEND	11
Family time/support networks	1
Health (emotional wellbeing, mental health)	5
Health (physical, dental)	6
Home	15
Identity needs (including life story work and protected characteristics)	4
Legal advice needed	0
Moving homes (planning and support)	5
IRO not being kept informed/consulted appropriately	3
Safety (must start at formal)	11
Transition planning for leaving care	13
Voice of the child/young person not being heard	29
Historical other – for reporting only	137

The most common areas raised by IROs were around drift in Permanence Planning, planning for young people leaving care, education/SEND and Safety (of the child). Multiple areas can be raised on one escalation.

The categories were updated this year and provide more detail about the subject of the escalation, and incorporating more child-focussed language. The ‘historical other’ category shows the phasing out of the broad ‘umbrella’ categories, such as ‘provision of services’, which did not give us enough information about the reason for the escalation. Escalations are now a more effective tool to improve practice through support (identifying where practice needs to change) not just challenge. This will become more helpful moving into 25-26 as the old categories are completely phased out.

The above data does not include escalations still open at the end of the reporting period, of which there were an additional 31.

Escalation tracking meetings

Escalation tracking meetings were introduced in November 2024 and are now held monthly with Service Managers for all service areas (Locality Teams, Permanence, B2SA, and Asylum Seekers Team). A structured monthly tracker was developed in February 25. Actions set for progressing escalations are now tracked consistently. It has helped improve working relationships and maintain

oversight of complex or difficult to resolve escalations and helps with timely resolution of issue for children and families.

The average time to resolve an escalation prior to the tracking meetings has improved from 79 to 48, and it is hoped this will continue to improve through 25-26. The service still prioritises effective resolution of the issue over timeliness, to avoid repeated escalations for the same issue.

Closer working between the IRO service and the Safeguarding Partnership has improved, to enable IROs to escalate to partner agencies more effectively. The Service Manager for the Dorset Safeguarding Partnership will be attending a Team Meeting in 2025 to ensure the team are confident in how to do this and provide support if needed.

Recognition of good practice:

To reflect the commitment of this service to strengths-based practice and high challenge high support, we have also created a 'recognition of good practice' note which is added to the child's record to shine a light on good practice.

There have been 55 notes to recognise good practice this year, covering issues such as relationship-based practice, good quality assessment, and child focussed recording on the file.



"I just wanted to say how impressed I was with the social work report provided by Kate for K's most recent child in care review held on the 27th March. Her report was very comprehensive and must have taken her some time to write – I really appreciated her hard work" (IRO)



"“She (the mum) wanted to share with me how brilliant and amazing (her words) you have been with her and the children. She tells me that the children have a lot of confidence in you and are more than happy to contact you if, and when needed. Though it was important to share this with you. Great feedback from a family during a stressful time for them. Well done.” (IRO)



"Linda's social work throughout this has been excellent. T's needs have remained at the forefront and she has done a sterling job as lead professional - both in liaising with professionals and foster carers - but also in her sensitive and empathic approach to working with T's parents; his mother herself a care leaver. I am sure that T will enjoy a great childhood with his new carers and I am pleased for him too that it is likely that his birth parents will retain a role in this. A very well done to all involved, and especially to Linda." (IRO)

Example of the impact of an escalation:

Significant risks to 3 children were identified when their father was found to be a sexual risk to children. Positive work by the Social Work team engaged the mother and enabled her to understand the risk and become more protective of her children. This work was completed under a Care Order with the children living at home with her. However, when the time came to discharge the Care Orders there was some drift and delay. An escalation by the QARO on 9th July 2024 supported progression of this to court and the Care Orders were discharged on 14th October.

These children will now longer have the intrusion of Social Workers into their lives, and this will reassure and empower their mother to move on with a new chapter of their lives.

Thematic audits and broader Quality Assurance work

Themes and thematic audits completed by the IRO team and Service Manager help to identify where practice can be strengthened with Children in Care. The focus of these comes from a variety of sources including themes noticed in the day to day IRO work; those raised by the Youth Voice Network; requests linked to the Corporate Parenting Board Delivery Plan; themes identified by Senior Managers; and themes identified during inspection work/auditing.

The 'Safe and Settled Care' learning event in September 2024 was organised and co-ordinated by the IRO Service Manager to 'close the loop' by providing training to practitioners that had been identified as needed through the previous years audits.

Workshops covered 'Planning for Safe and Stelled Futures' (Permanence Planning); Being Settled Where You Live' (Placement Stability) and 'Returning to Parents' (Reunification) it was a success, and 57 practitioners attended from 9 different teams. Positive feedback included:

- I have more knowledge on the skills needed.
- I am going to review how my team fill in the paperwork and get them to consider who this is for and what should be included.
- I am more aware of the process now and it was interesting to consider Bias.
- Add to the discussions I have within my team, with children and young people, foster carers and colleagues in children's services around 'permanence' and reunification. Taking away the slides from Sonia and the NSPCC tool will be really helpful for future discussions.
- I support young people in care daily and it will help me think of how my Practice influences others

A further event will be held in October 2025. This year thematic audits have been completed by the IRO service on the Child's Voice and Family Participation; Permanence Planning Meetings (Quality) and Supporting Identity for Children in Care. Workshops will be offered on all three and it is hoped that attendance will increase and learning from last year's event will improve the conference further.

It is planned to continue this annually and address the learning needs identified in thematic audits consistently this way.

Current resources issues impacting on outcomes for children in care

The national shortages of suitable foster families and good quality care provision continue to be a challenge for us in Dorset. It makes matching more difficult and can result in more frequent moves for children. A new project with Impower consultancy in 2025 is hoped to improve this and provide better tools for maximising opportunities both for individual children, and for strategic planning.

Children living outside of Dorset continues to be a challenge and can impact particularly on timeliness of IHAs (Initial Health assessments), access to education provision (especially where the young person has SEND) as well as planning for support and accommodation when the young person turns 18.

A specific area of shortage is appropriate care for young people who need a Deprivation of Liberty Order, and/or have complex needs which are not able to be supported by existing Children's Homes. A project took place this year to submit a bid for development of a specialist provision, in partnership with health. However, this was not able to be progressed due to the NHS Dorset were not ready to commission this.

The availability of NHS dentist places has been a concern for some time and is now improving due to the launch of a new initiative by the CIC health team. This supports dentist practices to use a trauma informed approach with patients and provides an incentive to offering NHS places for children in care and care leavers. A project to support those young people who decline their dentist appointments is planned for 2025 to make the most use of the new scheme and improve young people's dental health further.

Young People from the Youth Voice Network have raised the need for better mental health services for children in care. One that will be improved is with the CAMHS transformation programme. CAMHS will be modelling a graduated approach with the iThrive model, including expansion of mental health in school teams. We hope to see the impact of this over the next 18 months for all children, including children in care.

5. Young People's experience/voice

The 'Your life beyond care' Bright Spots Survey results were received in September 2024, giving a valuable insight into how Dorset's Care Leavers feel and what their needs are. A total of 234 young people completed the survey across a range of ages. Bright Spots of practice included ease of contact with their Personal Advisor; internet access and pets; with positive results for friendships and partners offering emotional support. Areas to be strengthened were identified as 'good friends'; feeling lonely; 'doing things that are worthwhile'; 'being happy with how I look'; and feeling positive about the future. Finances, Education Employment and Training, 'Feeling safe where I live' and levels of Wellbeing were also identified as areas that need more support.

Since the report was received the Care Leavers Service have continued to develop the 'Pathways to Employment Programme' and apprenticeships within the Council, as well as the Staying Close and Mentoring Programmes, amongst others. The learning from the survey has directly informed the

Corporate Parenting Board delivery plan. This evidences that the way the services are developing is in line with, and in response to, what young people tell us.

The IRO Service Manager regularly attends Network meetings and Informal Corporate Parenting Board, to hear what is important to young people who are experts by experience. Examples throughout this report show how young people's voice continues to influence and shape what we do. There is much more that could be done, and we will continue to be ambitious about working with and being directed by young people with lived experience as they understand best what the issues are and how they can be improved.

IROs have been leading the way with 'Mind of My Own', role modelling how it can be used to enable young people to give their views in everyday practice.

Identity has been raised by young people as an area of practice that needs to be improved. This has become one of the priority areas for the Corporate Parenting Board Delivery Plan, and the IRO service manager is leading on this priority area. Improvements have begun including plans for adding a prompt for identity to care plans; creating an 'identity' training page on the learning hub, completing an audit on identity for children in care, developing a training workshop, working to increase the diversity of foster carers, training for foster carers and improving the delegated authority process. The implementation and success of these actions will be reported on in next year's report.

Care experienced people, research and theory, continues to tell us about the importance of language. The IRO service manager has drafted a new 'home finding' form which is based on more child focussed language, simplified for ease of use and will hopefully improve the speed with which we can find new homes for children and better matching. Implementing this form will be part of a bigger project with the Head of Good Care Provision and Commissioning Service in 2025.

5. Review of areas for development identified in the 2023-24 Annual Report:

1. Increase the focus on the child's voice.

This year the IRO service took part in the 'Takeover Challenge' and the outcome and actions resulting from that show direct changes being implemented because of what young people have told us matters.

Pre-escalations and escalations have been used to amplify young people's voices where they are not being heard, and this is an area for continued focus in 25-26

The IRO team have been pioneers for the Mind of My Own app, promoting its use with children and young people in care, as detailed above this has been embedded as the default method for gaining children's views for child in care reviews.

2. Improve challenge around drift and delay

The IRO service has introduced more consistent structured midway reviews, called the 'IRO progress check'. These track whether recommendations have been followed through and give more opportunities to prevent drift and delay for children.

Challenge around drift and delay has been a top area for escalations this year, and the new tracking meetings are helping to give these even more impact.

3.Support better transition planning for care leavers

IROs have not been able to start the structured check in with Care Leavers at 6 months due to delays with the mosaic form being added. However, IROs have a flexible 'closure' date and can stay allocated to a young person for a short period to assure themselves a young person is settled. Many keep in touch with young people after they turn 18, and the formal 'check-in' will strengthen this once added to Mosaic.

As evidenced in this report planning for the young person turning 18 is one of the most frequent areas of challenge for IROs this year, and there have been some examples of robust escalation. In 25-26 the Service Manager will be meeting regularly with the Care Leavers Service Manager to highlight any young people where the plan is not clear or not secured, and assist where needed. It is still an area where we can continue to improve.

4. Support with learning from audits

The Safe and Settled Care Learning Event went ahead and was successful. Now it will become an annual event and be improved for next year.

5. Maintain timeliness of reviews and recommendations

The team have maintained good timeliness with its core functions. Child in Care Review timeliness and completing recommendations consistently being above 90%. Unfortunately, the timeliness of minutes being completed within 20 days has not yet improved and this is an area of continued focus into 25/26. Completion of escalations within 20 days has seen a big improvement and there is further work to do.

6. Conclusion and Plan for 25/26 - 5 key priorities

Reflecting on our progress over the last year I am pleased to report that the service remains stable, committed and focussed on children in care. Working in partnership with the Youth Voice service has been strengthened, and this helps to keep the balance between supporting the business and being a strong voice for children.

The strengths of the service continue to be professionalism, conscientiousness, consistency and positive relationships with the wide variety of professionals working with children in care, as well as families and young people themselves.

Where we need to improve is in consistently challenging areas where practice should be improved, through formal escalations, as well as our own minutes timeliness.

1. Improving the timeliness of Child in Care Review Meeting minutes.

We will utilise new technology to improve the timeliness of minutes, as well as performance management approaches.

2. Continue to challenge where there is drift and delay in Permanence Planning, including planning for young people turning 18.

Continue to use recommendations, IRO progress checks and escalations to address drift and delays.

3. Increased focus on the child's voice and being guided by what matters to young people in care and care leavers.

Close working with the Youth Voice Network, Corum Voice survey and 'Ask Me What Matters' to ensure we are asking, addressing and escalating what matters to young people.

4. Continuing and improving the Safe and Settled Care Learning Event to learn from audit findings.

We will complete more thematic audits, in line with young people's and corporate priorities and deliver training based on the needs identified. Learning from feedback from last year and increasing input/co-design with young people where possible.

5. Improve practice around supporting the identities of children and young people in care.

Ensuring learning from the audit is shared and recommendations carried out to strengthen practice in this area.