Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2025/2026

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

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September 2026

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Artist: Expert by Experience from Youth Voice

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 statutory role as set out in the IRO Handbook. The IRO role is a statutory role described in legislation and has responsibility for providing independent monitoring of the Local Authority's care planning for all children in care. They are responsible for ensuring the child's voice is heard and taken into account in planning, and challenging where required to ensure the Local Authority fulfils its duties to children in care. In practice this includes regular Child in Care Review meetings, visiting the child and escalating issues to management where challenge is required. This year we have reverted to the statutory title of Independent Reviewing Officer. This annual report covers the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

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 maintain a collaborative and strengths based approach closely linked to Corporate Parenting Board, the Youth Voice team, and our operational teams. The service strives to model 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 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.

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.

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. 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. The diversity in the team is currently low, although white European ethnicities and different sexualities and gender are represented in the team.

The team has experienced some changes towards the end of the year with several long standing members of the team retiring, and recruitment to those posts underway. The Service Manager has remained in post since May 2023.

Caseloads for IROs are between 60-70 (increase since last year) 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 for 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 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 continued to be used this year.

Working with other teams

Dorset has a locality-based model for most Children in Care until long term care becomes the plan, at which point they transfer to the Permanence Service. There are two specialist services for children in care – Birth to Settled Adulthood for children with disabilities and the Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers Service. Escalation tracking meetings between the IRO Service Manager and Locality Service Managers maintains relationships and working together between the different parts of the service. The IRO Service Manager has delivered training to other teams this year to improve understanding of the IRO role and the Local Authority's duties in relation to the role.

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

The team sits within the Quality Assurance and Partnerships service, under a Quality Assurance Service Manager and the team complete monthly audits across a range of practice areas as well as thematic and dip audits. This year included the practice leading up to children coming into care and supporting identity for children in care.

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, 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, Practice Leads, colleagues in Practice, Policy and Procedures and Workforce Development who sit within the partnership.

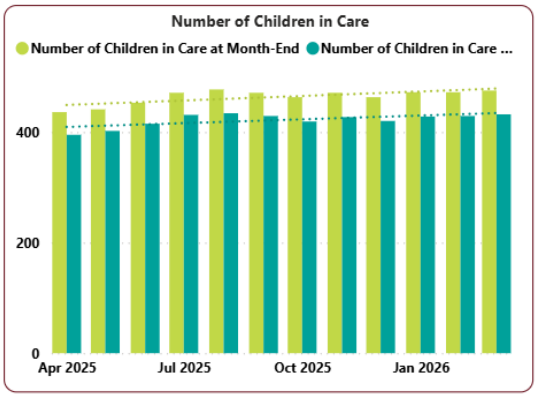
Supervision and training

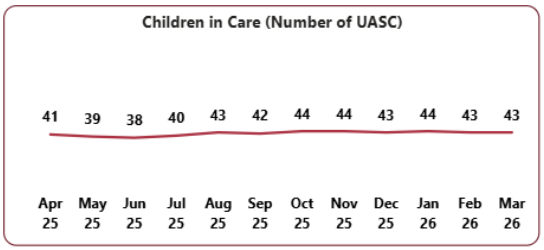
Supervision for IROs takes place regularly and covers personal, performance and practice issues. In person team meetings are held monthly with guests/visitors from partner teams and agencies to develop stronger relationships and up to date knowledge about development in other service areas. An annual Team Development Day was been held in July 2025, focussed on team building and service development plans.

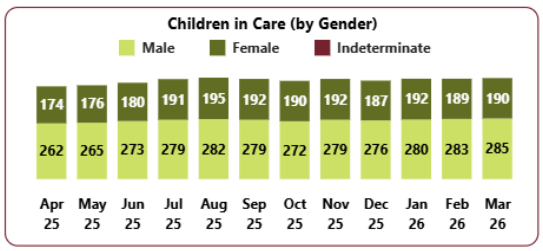
Training for IROs is available through the council training programme and IROs have been provided with a range of training opportunities throughout the year.

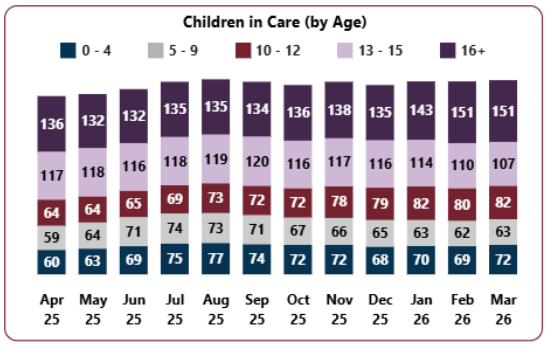
Regional and National links have been maintained and strengthened, and the IRO CPD event in October 2025 was well attended by Dorset IROs. The Dorset IRO Service Manager led a workshop sharing the voices of care experienced young people from Dorset.

3. Profile of children in care in Dorset









The table above shows the overall numbers of children in care has increased significantly, by 37, over the period of this report. This is excluding Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who have increased by 2.

A detailed thematic audit was completed by the IRO Service Manager in 2025 with recommendations for Operational Managers to consider. Themes identified were the need to ensure children with a care history were allocated to suitably experienced workers and the risk of coming back into care recognised at the start of that work. It was also noted that Family Group Conferences could be better used at an early stage, and that there should be a focus on using the Line of Sight framework consistently to ensure rigorous oversight of children coming into care.

4. Performance data for the service:

Number and Timeliness of Reviews, Recommendations and Minutes.

IROs in Dorset write their minutes in the form of a letter to the child or young person.

The total number of reviews completed this year is 1,348, an increase explained by the increase in the number of children in care. Overall, the number of reviews completed in timescales is 93% almost the same as last year. This has been consistent with every month this year being over 89% and 5 months at 95% or more. 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 been maintained 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 also positive to see the number of minutes completed in 20 days has improved from 45 – 67%. It is hoped that this will improve again next year. High caseloads and extensive out of area travel are the main reasons for delayed write ups. As the recommendations are sent out within 5 days this does not impact on actions being progressed.

IRO progress checks (also known as md-way reviews) are often completed between reviews to ensure progress is being made, recommendations are being followed and identify if further actions are needed.

Annual figures

Task	Total number	Percentage	Comparison to 24-25
Child in care reviews that took place	1348		+97
Child in care reviews that took place within timescales (not including overdue reviews)	1260	93%	-1%
Child in care reviews with completed recommendations	1347	99.9%	same
Child in care reviews with completed recommendations within 5 working days	1218	90%	-1%
Child in care reviews with full review minutes completed	1342	99.5%	+8%
Child in care reviews with full minutes completed within 20 working days.	912	67%	+22%

Participation and advocacy

Participation levels for reviews remain consistently high with a year total of 92%, 9 months were 90% or higher and a lowest month of 85% (10 children). Reasons why children had not participated are illness, disability and personal choice.

'Mind of My Own' is also now the default way the team formally seek young people's views prior to their review, alongside seeing them and talking to them.

A 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.

We have received 15 feedback forms this year which has been mostly positive and has helped individual IROs understand how to individualise reviews and has on one occasion helped us to identify when a parent could participate more. 3 have been received from children or young people; 7 from family members; 2 from foster carers; 2 from professionals. One young person fed back 'I thought the review was brilliant'.

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 Children in Care was 203 individual children, and 55% of all referrals for advocacy were for Child in Care Reviews. Children and young people often tell us they would prefer an existing trusted adult (for example foster carer) to speak on their behalf or to speak for themselves so not all children will need or want an advocate. A workshop to support closer collaboration between Independent Advocates and IROs was held this year and was well attended. An action plan was produced for working together more effectively. The Service Manager is part of the contract monitoring group for advocacy and meets monthly with the NYAS 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. 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 31st March 2026	
All Children in Care	476
Percentage of all Children in Care who have had an IRO contact in the last 6 months	93%
Those in placements where a contact is expected to take place	468
Percentage of those above, who have had an IRO contact in the last 6 months	95%

For the first half of the year (April 25 – September 25) 97% of children expected to have contact with their IRO over the previous 6 months did so. These figures have improved from last year despite the number of children in care increasing. This indicates a consistent picture, and positive relationships between the IRO and their children is something the team are rightly proud of.

IRO 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 2025 and March 2026 78% of children had more than one contact with their IRO (higher than last year) and 35 of these children had 5 or more contacts with their IRO (also higher than last year)

'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. A very small number children do not wish to have contact with their IRO, the reason for this is usually that don't want to be reminded they are in care or meet additional professionals. In these cases, the IRO would send their 'one page profile' and contact details for the young person to have should they change their mind.

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 respectful 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	57	73
QARO Pre-escalation: Child's journey not reflected on the file	63	72
QARO Pre-escalation: Child's voice not being heard	13	14
QARO Pre-escalation: Education (incl. SEND)	1	1
QARO Pre-escalation: Family contact	10	10
QARO Pre-escalation: Health	11	13
QARO Pre-escalation: Permanence/transitions	60	76
Total	**152**	**259**

This report shows that the IROs have continued to focus on ensuring care plans and pathway plans are up to date, and that there is good planning for young people turning 18. Others focus on Permanence Plans being completed and updated, and plans being progressed to achieve long term matching with foster carers.

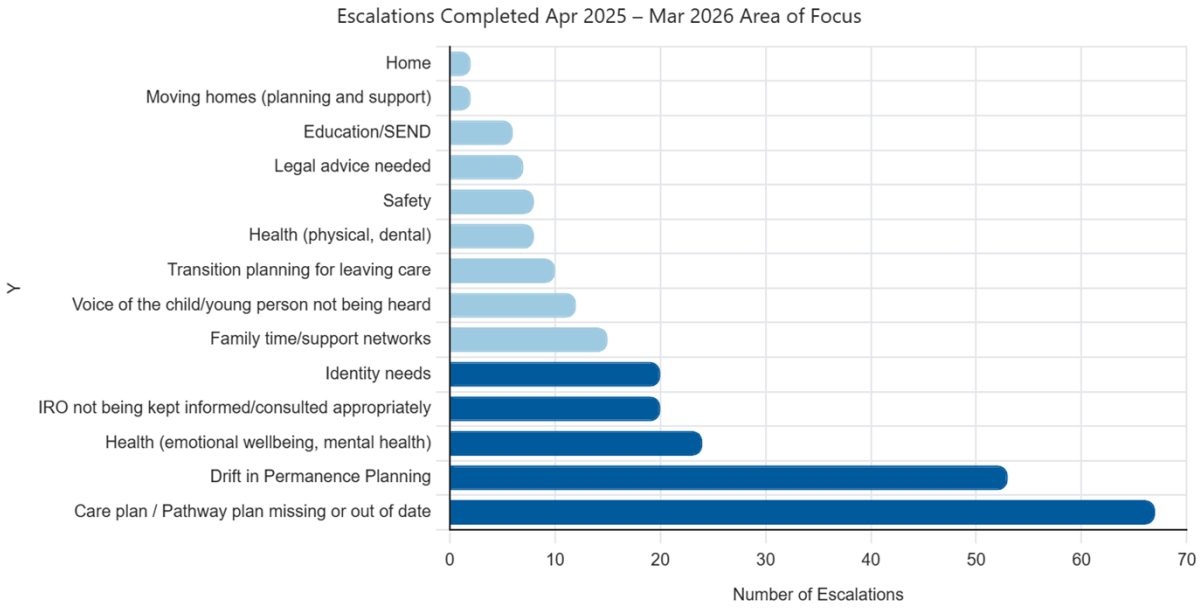
The 'child's journey not reflected on the file' category refers to missing documents, 'chronology of significant events' not being updated and delays in recording visits. Care experienced people have told us how much they dislike having to repeat their story to new workers and how important it is that 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.

Informal and Formal escalations resolved.

Informal Escalation	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Totals
99 (+20)	79 (+27)	44 (+18)	9 (+1)	3 (+2)	0 (same)	**234 (+54)**

In the year 2025 – 2026 there has been a 40% increase in resolved escalations. Increases have occurred in all stages.

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.



Nearly half (47.2%) of all escalations completed between April 2025 and March 2026 have included either missing care plans or pathway plans or drift in permanence planning, highlighting these as the predominant areas of concern identified through the escalation process.

As a response to this a 'quick reference guide' to Permanence Planning has been written by the IRO Service Manager and Permanence Service Manager, to help improve the quality of permanence planning meetings, Permanence Planning training was delivered in Oct 25 and will further work is planned for next year, including changes to assessments and planning templates to increase practitioners focus on this area of children's needs.

There has also been a significant increase in escalations about Identity, Emotional/Mental Health, and Family Time. There are plans to address these issues noted in the section below 'current resources issues impacting on outcomes for children in care'.

Escalation tracking meetings

Escalation tracking meetings, with a structured monthly tracker, are held monthly with Service Managers for all service areas (Locality Teams, Permanence, B2SA, and Asylum Seekers Team). These meetings maintain management oversight of complex or difficult to resolve escalations and supports timely resolution of issues for children and families.

The average completion time this year was 71 days, with a median completion time of 53 days. The higher mean average reflects a small number of escalations with significantly longer timescales, which increased the overall average. This is similar times to last year, showing the team are doing more escalations without compromising timescales.

Recognition of good practice:

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

There have been 52 notes to recognise good practice this year, covering issues such as relationship-based practice, good quality assessment, and child focussed recording on the file.

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 was held this year in October 25 and was organised and co-ordinated by the IRO Service Manger to 'close the loop' by providing training to practitioners that had been identified as needed through the previous year's audits.

Workshops covered 'Respecting Me, My Journey and My Individuality', 'Planning Well so I feel settled for the Future' and Working Well with My Parents and Wider Family'.

It was a success, and 60 practitioners attended from 9 different teams. Positive feedback included:

- I feel I have learned so much from today and will incorporate this into my practice
- Thought-provoking discussions
- Has made me think about how I will do things differently
- Opportunity to hear from and talk to people in different roles
- It was a fantastic training event!

As part of the Identity Pillar work for Corporate Parenting Board the Identity training has been delivered to several more teams since the initial date. It was also delivered as part of the IRO Regional Conference in September 25, showcasing Dorset's practice across the region and giving a platform to the voice of care experienced young people across the southwest.

The Safe and Settled Care Learning Event is now a regular event. This year's will be held in November 26. Workshops will be on the topics of 'Learning from Complaints from Children in Care', 'Savings, Pocket Money and Decision Making', 'Using Language that Cares in Records'. It is hoped that attendance will increase and we have been working on promotional strategies to achieve this.

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 in Dorset. It makes matching more difficult and can result in more frequent moves for children. Valuing Care (Project) was launched this year and supports Dorset's sufficiency arrangements by improving the quality of children's profiles, matching with foster carer profiles, strengthening provider engagement and enabling earlier discussions around matching, home finding and permanence planning. While formal impact analysis is still underway, Valuing Care is becoming increasingly embedded within practice and is helping to identify opportunities that improve outcomes for children and young people.

A Reunification Strategy is being progressed next year, which will also support children to return home where it is safe to do so, enabling family networks and releasing resources for the children who need to remain in care.

IROs have highlighted inconsistencies with Family Time for children over the year and are pleased to note that plans for a review of the who system around family time, and Dorset taking part in the Enduring Relationships Programme in 26/27, which will strengthen this area of practice.

Young People from the Youth Voice Network have raised the need for better mental health services for children in care. Further to improvements with the CAMHS transformation programme, Dorset Council have provided funding for our health colleagues to employ a Systemic Family Therapist, 1.6 WTE Emotional Health and Wellbeing Practitioners and the existing psychology support is now funded along with clinical lead time that also supports the Harbour Psychotherapists.

5. Young People's experience/voice

The 'Your life beyond care' Bright Spots Survey will be completed in June and July 2026 and we look forward to the results.

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. 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 the most frequent users of 'Mind of My Own', role modelling how it can be used to enable young people to give their views in everyday practice.

The identity work co-ordinated by the IRO service manager was recently presented to Informal Corporate Parenting Board and plans to continue this for 26-27 are underway.

Young People's feedback on their need for greater choice and control in their lives, the importance of clear and respectful records and for better understanding of their life stories will be the focus for next year. A specific piece of work on improving the framework for decision-making for day to day issues for children in care will be completed and will be reported on in next year's report, as well as actions to improve life story work and good record keeping.

5. Review of areas for development identified in the 2024-25 Annual Report:

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.

   We have seen a 22% increase in minutes timeliness to 67% within 20 days. This will continue to be focus for next year.

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.

   The escalation summary in the report shows a clear and determined focus on this area, with 120 issues escalated, accounting for almost half of all escalations.

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.

   The team have continued to work closely alongside Senior Managers, the Youth Voice Team and NYAS Advocacy Service to platform young people's voice and ensure the issues raised by them are addressed and inform the direction of practice. Participation in reviews is consistently high and escalations in respect of the child's voice not being heard are also reflected in this report. The Safe and Settled Care Learning Event training event is a platform to influence practice using care experienced young people's direct feedback.

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

   This has been achieved as described above with the successful completion of further audits and training events.

5. **Improve practice around supporting the identities of children and young people in care.**
   As described in this report, this has been achieved with the training workshops, improved access to the resources, launch of the Gender Identity Toolkit through the Dorset Safeguarding Partnership, and ongoing work on increasing diversity in the foster carer network.

This report demonstrates a service that remains child-centred, effective and ambitious for Dorset's children in care.

The inspection outcome, strong participation levels, improved performance measures and evidence of effective challenge through the escalation process provide assurance that the IRO Service continues to fulfil its statutory responsibilities while promoting positive change for children and young people.

As we move into 2026-27, our focus will remain on reducing drift and delay, strengthening permanence planning, improving timeliness and ensuring that all children experience care planning that is purposeful, responsive and shaped by what matters most to them.

1. **Continuing to improve the timeliness of Child in Care Review Meeting minutes.**
   Continue to improve the timeliness of minutes, as well as performance management approaches.

2. **Utilising the increased escalation data to support strategic changes**
   This will be achieved through strengthened quarterly meetings, and feedback direct to the Permanence Service Manager, Heads of Service and Corporate Director.

3. **A stronger IRO assurance of court care plans, and all significant decisions for children in care**.
   This will be achieved through improved collaboration between the IRO service and operational teams, legal services and CAFCASS

4. **More ambitious 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, and 'Ask Me What Matters' to ensure we are asking, addressing and escalating what matters to young people.

5. **Continuing and improving the Safe and Settled Care Learning Event to learn from audit findings.**
   We will deliver more training workshops, in line with young people's and corporate priorities, based on care experienced young people's authentic voices.