



INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE

(Children in Care)

ANNUAL REPORT

2024-2025

The IRO report is presented to the Senior Leadership Team and Corporate Parenting Board in accordance with the Children and Young people's Act 2008 and subsequent statutory guidance published in 2010 (IRO Handbook).

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Introduction

This Annual Report covers the period from April 2024 to March 2025 and has been prepared by the IRO Service in accordance with statutory requirements. Its purpose is to provide the Corporate Parenting Board and senior leadership with a comprehensive overview of the Council's performance in supporting children in the care of the local authority.

The information presented draws on multiple data sources, including Eclipse case management reports, statutory annual returns, Annex A submissions, manual data collection, and both regional and national datasets. A key priority identified in last year's report was the need to enhance performance management reporting. The council has since introduced a dedicated Power BI dashboard, which has significantly improved access to and analysis of critical data, however this was not available until part way through the year so we have not been able to utilise its full potential to inform this report. The dashboard also requires further development for it to fully reflect the breadth of the experiences of children in care in Halton.

Halton's IRO Service

The IRO Service operates within the statutory framework of the IRO Handbook, which guides care planning, placement, and review for children in care. The service also aligns with the 2023 Children's Social Care National Framework, which promotes family-based care, stability, and nurturing relationships.

Halton's Children in Care IRO team comprises of seven experienced social worker professionals, most with prior management experience. Co-location with the Children in Care, Care Leavers, and Fostering teams supports collaboration, effective communication, and IRO visibility across the wider service.

Halton's IROs actively contribute to regional and national practice development through participation in the North West IRO Managers Group, the National IRO Advisory Group, and joint forums with Cafcass and the judiciary. This outward facing engagement ensures that Halton's voice informs broader strategic discussions and supports best practice across the sector.

Halton's Children in Care Population

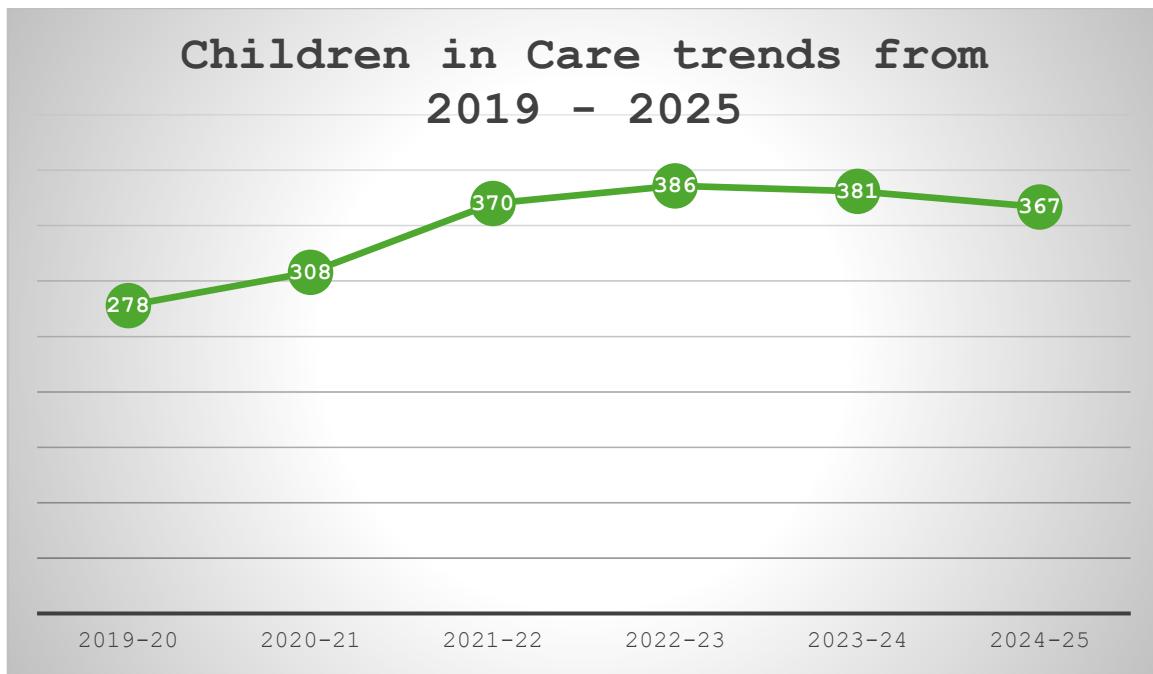
The total number of children in care in Halton has steadily decreased over the past three years, from 386 at the end of 2023 to 381 in 2024, and further to 367 by the end of 2025 — representing an overall reduction of approximately 5%. This downward trend contrasts with the patterns observed across our statistical neighbours, the North West region, and national figures, which have shown more variable year-on-year fluctuations. Halton's sustained reduction reflects the deliberate and focused work across Children's Services to support children in remaining safely within their families. However, our rate per 10,000 children remains comparatively high. If the current downward trend continues, we anticipate aligning more closely with both regional and national averages. Key contributing factors include strengthened assessment

processes, improved planning, and the effective use of the Public Law Outline — all of which are central to our ongoing Improvement Plan. Looking ahead, we aim to build on this progress through the implementation of several targeted strategies:

- **Strengthening Early Help and Child in Need services**, including enhanced Family Hub support to prevent escalation of concerns.
- **Improving use of the Public Law Outline (PLO)** and introducing Family Network Meeting Coordinators to support family-led safety planning.
- **Prioritising the timely review of care plans** for children living with parents or relatives and progressing cases where local authority involvement may no longer be required.

Children in Care Trends (2016–2024)

The graph below illustrates the trends in the number of children in care across Halton, North West, Statistical Neighbours, and England from 2016 to 2024.



The Role of IROs in Reducing the Need for Care

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) play a vital role in supporting Halton's efforts to safely reduce the number of children entering or remaining in care. Their work focuses on improving oversight, promoting family-led solutions, and ensuring that children's voices are central to planning.

Key contributions include:

- **Promoting Timely Planning:** IROs critically review care plans, challenge delays, and advocate for permanence through family-based alternatives where appropriate.

- **Supporting Family Solutions:** They encourage the use of Family Network Meetings and monitor reunification plans to ensure they are safe and sustainable.
- **Driving Quality and Accountability:** Through regular audits and feedback, IROs help improve practice, inform training, and shape service development.
- **Championing the Child's Voice:** IROs ensure children are heard in all decisions and advocate for less intrusive options when safe and appropriate.

These actions contribute to more effective, child-centred care planning and better long-term outcomes.

Care planning in Halton follows a clear hierarchy of permanence, prioritising:

- Reunification with parents where safe and appropriate
- Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) with relatives
- Long-term fostering (with kinship, Halton-approved, or independent carers)
- Short-term residential care
- Adoption (as a last resort)

Achieving permanence provides children with legal certainty, emotional security, and reduces the need for ongoing statutory involvement.

Permanence Outcomes for Children in Halton

Permanence Plan Achieved	2023–2024	2024–2025
Return to parents (no order)	39%	39%
SGO granted	27%	15%
Adopted	10%	13%
Staying Put arrangements	16%	21%
Matched to HBC carer	2%	0
Matched to IFA carer	3%	2%
Move to independence	3%	10%

The number of permanence plans secured through Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) has declined. This trend is partly due to delays in completing required assessments and the complexities inherent in

some arrangements. Factors such as coordinating family time and confirming financial support packages have contributed to delays, impacting the overall timeliness and progression of permanence planning.

To support improvement, this area will be tracked quarterly moving forward, enabling earlier identification of emerging themes. IROs play a critical role in this process and must ensure that such issues are identified through their oversight. Where delays or barriers are evident, these should be raised through formal escalation and challenge. This approach will help surface systemic issues and drive service improvements.

Strengthening the IRO role in monitoring, challenging, and influencing timely permanence planning will remain a key focus over the coming year.

Placement sufficiency remains a key issue, particularly in matching children to foster carers.

The placement of Halton's children in care.

Current Placement Type on 31 March	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Foster placement with relative or friend	74	59	53
	Inside LA: 50	Inside LA: 43	Inside LA: 30
	Outside LA:24	Outside LA:16	Outside LA: 23
Placement with other foster carer	163	176	170
	Inside LA: 95	Inside LA: 85	Inside LA: 84
	Outside LA:68	Outside LA: 91	Outside LA: 86
Secure Unit	1	0	0
Homes and hostels	44	43	57
Hostels and other supportive residential placements	32	29	34
Residential Schools	0	0	0
Other residential settings (NHS, Mother/Baby)	4	9	3
Placed for adoption (including placed with former foster carer)	1	6	3
Placed with own parents	66	52	42
In lodgings, residential employment or living independently	0	0	0
Other placement	1	10	5
Total	386	381	367

Placement Trends and Analysis (2022–2025)

As of 31 March 2025, Halton's children in care population stood at 367, continuing a downward trend from 386 in 2022–23. This reduction likely reflects the impact of some practice improvements around the Public Law Outline, some improved stability of the frontline workforce and a whole service commitment to the Stable Homes, Built on Love Strategy.

Foster placements with relatives or friends have shown a steady decline, particularly those located within Halton. This trend suggests ongoing challenges in identifying kinship carers who are both available and able to safely meet the needs of children. The reduction may also reflect broader systemic barriers, which IROs are well-placed to identify and challenge through their oversight and escalation processes. In contrast, placements with other foster carers have remained relatively stable, though there is a growing reliance on placements outside the borough, indicating ongoing pressures on local placement sufficiency.

There has been a significant increase in the use of homes and hostels, rising from 43 to 57 over the past year. This upward trend clearly reflects two key factors: a shift in the age profile of children in care—with more older young people transitioning into semi-independent living—and ongoing challenges in securing suitable foster placements for those aged 16 and over.

The data suggests that the difficulty in identifying and matching older children with appropriate foster carers is directly contributing to the increased reliance on semi-independent provisions. This is an area that requires continued scrutiny, and IROs are expected to monitor and escalate concerns where placement sufficiency or suitability is impacting care planning.

Some of these young people represent separated migrant children but the number of these young people has remained stable during the year. Similarly, supportive residential placements have seen a modest rise, while use of secure units and residential schools remains minimal.

The number of children placed with their own parents has decreased year-on-year, this reflects the improved practice within teams and a strengthened management oversight and tracking of children entering the PLO process and the strengthening of pre proceedings. Adoption placements peaked in 2023–24 but declined slightly in 2024–25, while other specialist placements (e.g. NHS or mother/baby units) remained low and variable.

These trends highlight both progress and ongoing challenges. While the overall reduction in the care population is encouraging, the data points to continued pressures in placement sufficiency—particularly for local foster care—and the need for sustained focus on permanence planning, reunification, and support for older children transitioning to independence.

IRO Practice and Performance Updates

Good Practice Notifications

In the period 1st April 2024 to the 31st March 2025 the IRO's have raised 45 Good Practice Notifications for social workers from the Child in Need and Children in Care teams.

The use of Good Practice Notifications is an important tool in promoting high-quality social work with children in care. These acknowledgements serve multiple purposes:

- **Reinforcing Positive Practice:** Recognising effective, child-centred work encourages continued high standards and professional excellence.
- **Promoting a Learning Culture:** Sharing examples of good practice supports reflective learning and continuous improvement across teams.
- **Boosting Morale:** Acknowledgement of good work contributes to staff motivation, job satisfaction, and retention.
- **Encouraging Consistency:** Highlighting strong practice helps establish clear benchmarks and promotes consistency across the service.
- **Improving Outcomes:** Ultimately, recognising and replicating good practice supports better outcomes for children through timely, well-informed, and effective care planning.

Good Practice Example 1: Positive impact for child – The social worker has taken her time in considering the right final plan for the two siblings. Her communication with me has been excellent and when I have queried things with her around prospective carers for the children, she has found out the answers and replied promptly. She is a curious social worker which has benefited the children she works hard and is passionate about the children she works for and has gone above and beyond to help them settle into their new placement, which has included working late and buying them things to help reassure them.

Good Practice Example 2: Positive Impact for child - I am providing this good practice notification following seeing the later life letter that the social worker has prepared for the child prior to the case being reallocated.

It is important to acknowledge the outstanding work done in preparing the later life letter for the child during the reallocation of her case. This work really shows how much the social worker cares and how professional she is with making sure the child has a clear and personal record of her journey. The effort put into writing this letter goes above and beyond, showing a deep commitment to the child's well-being. Hopefully, the social workers commitment will be clear to the child who I am sure will be feeling a little upset to lose her as a keyworker and this letter may go some way to support her feeling secure and informed during changes of worker.

This kind of work sets a great example and makes a real difference in the lives of the children social care support. It's a testament to the dedication and hard work that ensures children feel supported and valued throughout their journey.

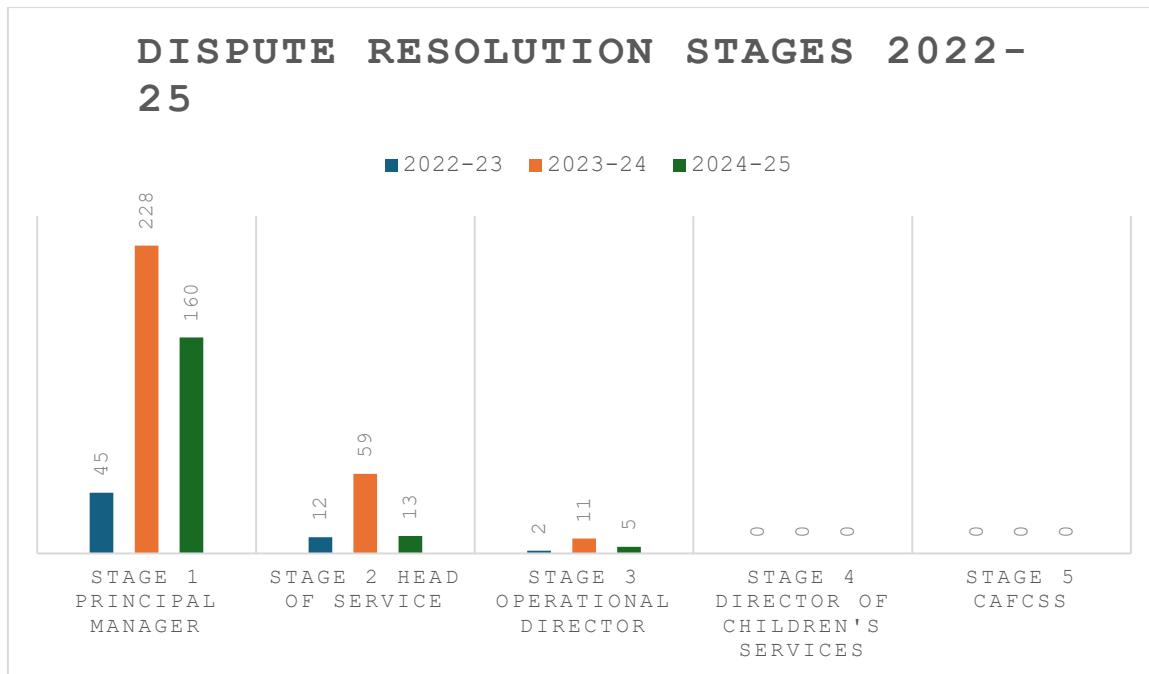
Informal Resolution of Concerns

Ongoing IRO oversight is vital to ensuring care plans are implemented effectively and emerging concerns are addressed promptly. In line with best practice, IROs prioritise informal resolution by engaging early with

social workers and team managers. These interventions are formally recorded using the IRO Oversight & Scrutiny Form on the child's electronic record.

In 2024–2025, IROs recorded 249 informal resolutions. This reflects stronger IRO presence and proactive case oversight. To better evidence the impact of these interventions, a new section has been added to the form to capture impact and outcomes more clearly.

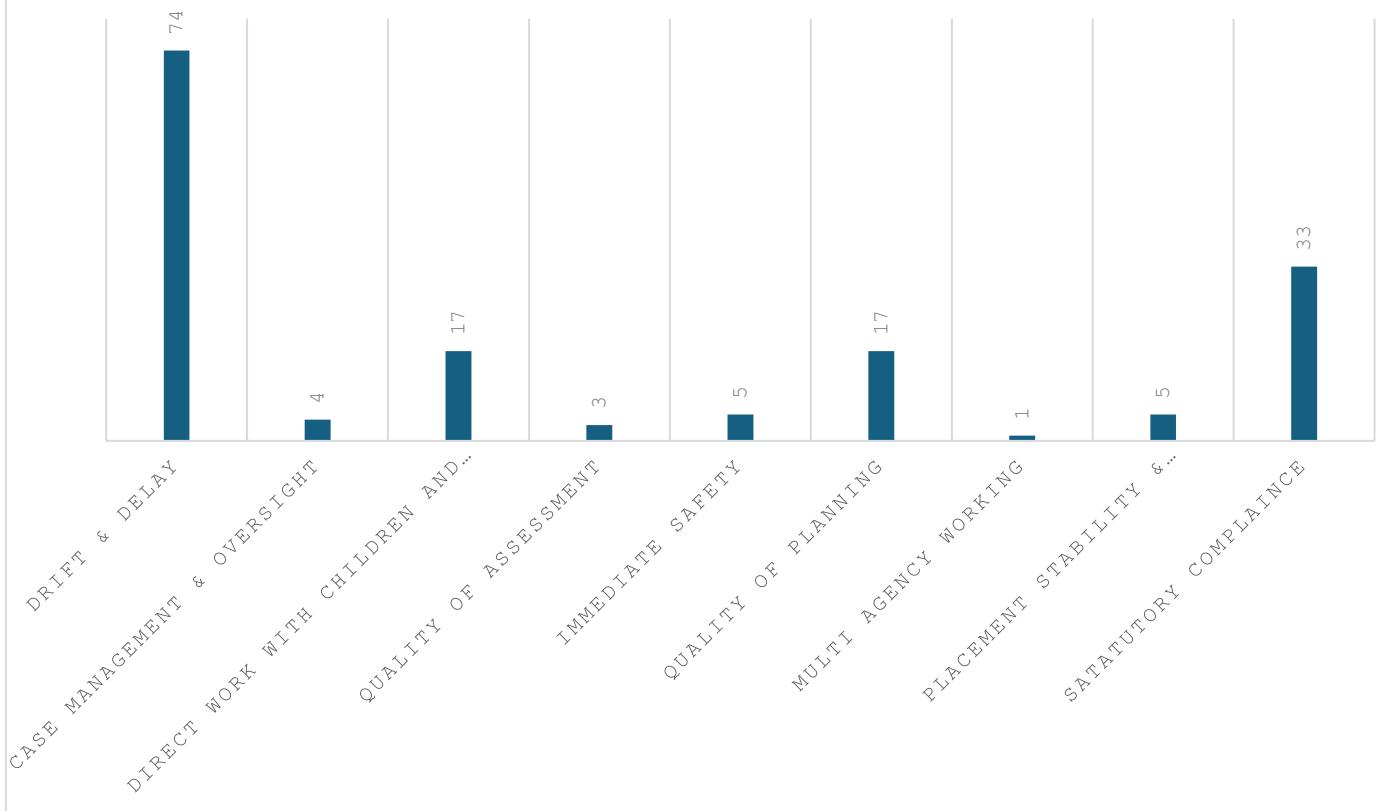
Dispute Resolution



Dispute Resolution: Analysis

- Stage 1 (Service Manager): The majority of disputes continue to be resolved at this stage. There was a sharp increase in 2023–2024 (228 cases), followed by a reduction to 1 in 2024–2025—still significantly higher than 2022–2023 (45). This suggests improved IRO challenge and oversight, though also reflects increased pressures or complexity in care planning.
- Stage 2 (Head of Service): Escalations peaked in 2023–2024 (59), then dropped sharply to 13 in 2024–2025, indicating more effective resolution at Stage 1 or fewer complex disputes requiring senior intervention.
- Stage 3 (Operational Director): Numbers remained low across all years, with a slight peak in 2023–2024. This suggests that most disputes are resolved before reaching senior leadership.
- Stages 4 & 5: No disputes were escalated to the Director of Children's Services or CAFCASS, indicating that all matters were resolved satisfactorily at earlier stages.

REASONS FOR ESCALATIONS 2024-25



Overview of Escalation Themes

The chart above presents nine categories of escalation reasons, reflecting areas where the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) has raised concerns during the year. The total number of escalations is **159**, distributed as follows:

Strengths in IRO Oversight

- **High escalation in Drift & Delay (48.1%)**: Indicates that IROs are actively identifying and challenging delays in progressing care plans, which is critical for timely decision-making and permanency planning.
- **Statutory Compliance (21.4%)**: Reflects strong IRO vigilance in ensuring legal duties are met, safeguarding children's rights.

Areas for Continued Focus

- **Quality of Assessment & Direct Work with Children (11% each)**: These figures suggest that IROs are actively scrutinising both the quality of assessments and the direct engagement with children—critical elements in ensuring that care planning is informed, child-focused, and responsive to individual needs.
- **Quality of Planning (3.2%)**: While lower, this still shows that IROs are raising concerns about the robustness and clarity of care plans.

Lower Escalation Areas

- **Placement Stability, Immediate Safety, Multi-Agency Working, and Case Management:** The relatively low number of escalations in these areas may indicate fewer identified issues or potential under-reporting. A more in-depth qualitative review is recommended to ensure that these critical aspects of care planning are being appropriately monitored and challenged where necessary.

The data demonstrates that IROs are effectively using their oversight role to challenge delays and statutory breaches—two of the most critical risks to children in care. Their focus on assessment quality and multi-agency working also supports improved planning outcomes. However, the relatively low escalation in planning quality and placement stability suggests a need for continued vigilance and possibly deeper scrutiny.

Timeliness of Reviews

In 2024–2025, 84% (830 of 992) of children in care reviews were held within statutory timescales—matching the performance from the previous year.

The primary reasons for delays included incomplete care plans and review documentation, which postponed meetings. Additionally, changes in social workers impacted timeliness, particularly where new workers were not promptly informed of review dates or where supervision did not adequately focus on upcoming reviews.

The service remains committed to achieving 95–100% timeliness. To support this, we will continue working closely with team managers and review administrative processes to improve coordination and planning.

Mid-Point Reviews (MPRs)

Mid-Point Reviews are a vital part of the care planning process for Children in Care, helping to maintain momentum, ensure accountability, and keep the child's needs central between statutory reviews.

A total 269 MPRs were completed during the year—an improvement on the previous year. This reflects ongoing efforts to strengthen IRO oversight and scrutiny. MPRs are a key mechanism for improving outcomes and securing timely permanence for children, and we remain focused on embedding them consistently.

Children's Participation in their Reviews.

	2024-2025	2023-2024	2022-2023
No of Reviews held	980	1080	1027
Reviews for children under the age of 4	215(22%)	246 (23%)	227 (22%)
Review for children over the age of 4	765	834	800
Children attended their review	471(62%)	504 (61%)	475 (59%)

Child participated through advocate or through other means consultation, discussion with IRO etc	288(37%)	311 (37%)	290 (37%)
Child did not participate in their review	18(2%)	19 (2%)	35 (4%)

Key Insights of children participation in their review meetings:

- Overall Reviews Held:** The number of reviews decreased from 1,080 in 2023–2024 to 980 in 2024–2025, reflecting a reduction in the care population and review frequency.
- Attendance Rates:** Attendance by children over age 4 has gradually improved—from 59% in 2022–2023 to 62% in 2024–2025—indicating stronger engagement efforts.
- Participation Through Other Means:** Remained steady at 37% across all three years, showing consistent use of advocates, consultation forms, or IRO discussions.
- Non-Participation:** Dropped from 4% to 2%, suggesting improved follow-up and flexibility in how children are supported to contribute.

We have undertaken focused development work with Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) during the year to strengthen the engagement of children in their Child in Care Reviews. While some progress has been made, several barriers to meaningful participation remain. These include the influence of adults in the child's life, who may seek to use the review to explore matters of importance to them at that time, which can sometimes unintentionally overshadow the child's voice. The structure of review meetings is also not always as child-focused as they should be. Additionally, when children initially decline to participate, IROs do not routinely revisit the conversation, missing opportunities to re-engage them in ways that might feel safer or more accessible. This highlights the need for more creative, flexible approaches that go beyond traditional formats and truly centre the child's experience and preferences.

To address these challenges, IROs did in the latter part of the reporting year develop a plan to 'reclaim children's reviews for children'. The impact of this will be reported in the next annual report but some of the measures we have taken have included strengthening our engagement with children when they come into care and before their first review and the quality assurance of IRO visits and contacts with children. Developing a more dynamic and ongoing approach to engagement, ensuring that when a child states that they do not wish to attend that we revisit the conversation at a later time and in a different way, recognising that timing and trust are key. We are actively engaging with children and young people to explore alternative formats for reviews—such as child-led agendas, visual tools, and more informal settings—that may feel more comfortable, inclusive, and empowering. This approach aims to ensure that their voices are central to the review process and that the environment supports meaningful participation. This work is in its infancy, we are exploring the use of QR codes for virtual contribution to service development and exploring how we can use the Lundy Model with children and young people to develop our service. Training and reflective sessions with IROs and other relevant adults in the child's life will be strengthened to reinforce the importance of the child's voice and to challenge unconscious biases that may limit participation.

Additionally, we will pilot the use of creative engagement methods, such as digital storytelling or one-page profiles to help children express their views in ways that feel authentic to them. Ultimately, our aim is to embed a culture where every child feels heard, respected, and meaningfully involved in decisions about their care.

Year	Number of Reviews	% Held in timescales	Number of Adjourned Review
2024 - 2025	992	84%	176
2023 - 2024	1078	84%	262
2022 - 2023	1027	79%	222
2021 - 2022	924	75%	163

We can see from the data above that:-

- Number of Reviews: Increased from 924 in 2021–2022 to a peak of 1,078 in 2023–2024, then slightly declined to 992 in 2024–2025.
- % Held in Timescales: Improved steadily from 75% in 2021–2022 to 84% in the last two years, indicating better timeliness.
 - Number of Adjourned Reviews: This rose significantly from 163 to 262 between 2021 and 2024, but dropped to 176 in 2024–2025, work has been completed during the year to address the standing down (adjournment) of reviews due to the lack of documentation and this accounts for the reduction of adjournments this year and we will continue to address this next year and hope to reduce this further. Compliance with the statutory 20 working day timeframe for holding adjourned reviews stands at 73% for the year—an improvement of 2% compared to the previous year. While this reflects positive progress, it remains an area for continued focus to ensure full compliance and consistency across all cases.

IRO Visits and Contact with Children

IROs are expected to visit or contact children when they enter care and before each review to build relationships and ensure their views are reflected in planning. Reports are being developed so we can report on the number and timeliness of visits in the future.

Quality assurance identified inconsistencies in how visits are recorded, with some lacking detail. Work is ongoing to improve consistency and ensure all contacts clearly reflect the child's views and engagement in their care planning.

While caseload pressures have limited the consistent use of contact during Mid-Point Reviews, this remains a priority. Building trusting relationships with IROs is key to empowering children, particularly where the IRO may be the most consistent professional in their care journey.

Feedback

The Lead Independent Conference and Review Service Manager met with some children and young people who attend the Children in Care Council and this is what they had to say about some of Halton's IROs.

"He is a nice person and spends a lot of time listening to me and lets me talk"

"I like my IRO they are good, easy to talk to"

"She is kind and considerate of my feelings and wishes and is great and stern when pushing for my wants and wishes"

"She comes and sees me and always gets back to me"

"My IRO listened to me when no one else would listen"

IRO's making a difference for children:

- A new IRO to our service picked up a young person who rarely engaged with his reviews or his previous IRO. This IRO spoke with his carer and asked about his likes and dislikes and discovered he loves aeroplanes. During an introductory visit she talked to him about his interests and told him about a place in North Wales where you can see the RAF jets fly past and this really sparked his interest and he is now talking to his IRO about planes but also about his plans and hopes for the future. It is hoped this relationship will continue to develop and he will attend and maybe chair his reviews in the not too distant future.
- A child in care whose progress was hindered by significant delays in care planning meetings and a lack of oversight, raising concerns about statutory compliance and the risk of drift in implementing the agreed care plan. The IRO identified these issues, including missed planning milestones and incomplete documentation, and took proactive steps to address them. Rather than immediately escalating the matter formally, the IRO engaged in informal challenge, directly liaising with the newly allocated manager to confirm whether the case had been appropriately handed over. This led to confirmation that the new social worker was aware of the outstanding actions and had begun rescheduling the overdue care planning meeting and Child in Care review. As a result of the IRO's timely intervention, management oversight was re-established, key planning events were set in

motion, and professionals were held accountable with clear expectations for timely reporting. This approach helped prevent further drift, reinforced the importance of progressing the child's care plan, and preserved placement stability. Ultimately, the IRO's involvement ensured that child's needs remained a priority and that planning for their future continued without unnecessary delay.

Independent Visitors and Advocacy Service

Independent Visitors and the Advocacy Service continue to be provided by our commissioned service with NYAS. For the year 2024/25 NYAS have:

- provided advocacy support for 67 children and young people in care (this is a 27% increase on last year).
- At the 31/03/25 8 young people are matched with an Independent Visitor (IV).
- There are 14 young people waiting to be matched, recruitment of IVs and matching is more difficult for our out of borough children which is the majority of this cohort.
- 4 IVs are trained and ready to match which will reduce the waiting list to 10.

This commissioned service will be reviewed next year.

Progress on 2024-2025 priorities

Priority 1: Improving IRO Effectiveness and Consistency to support timely Care Planning and Permanence for children and young people.

Over the 2024–2025 reporting period, Halton's Independent Reviewing Service has taken a number of targeted steps to strengthen the effectiveness of IROs across all aspects of children's care planning, with a particular emphasis on achieving permanence. Activity includes:

- **Workforce Stability and Continuity:** The transition of two agency IROs into permanent posts and the recruitment of a part-time IRO have enhanced team stability, supporting greater continuity for children and improved oversight of care plans.
- **Caseload Management.** During this reporting year whilst caseloads have remained above the recommended 50–70 range, peaking at 79 during the year, children in care review meetings have been held at the required frequency. However, high caseloads did limit the depth of IRO scrutiny between reviews. The return of an IRO from long-term absence in March 2025 is expected to ease pressure in 2025–2026. This will enable IRO's to dedicate more time to scrutinising permanence plans and supporting timely progression in between review meetings.
- **Enhanced Performance Reporting:** The introduction of a dedicated Power BI dashboard has significantly improved the service's ability to monitor key performance indicators in real time. This has enabled more consistent tracking of review timeliness, mid-point reviews, and the progression of care plans, supporting early identification of practice gaps.

- **Reflective Supervision and Peer Learning:** Monthly reflective supervision sessions provide a structured space for IROs to review their practice, engage with audit feedback, and reflect on complex cases. These sessions are complemented by team meetings and the aiming high meetings that focus on shared learning and alignment with service priorities.
- **Practice Standards and Expectations:** Clear expectations have been reinforced around key elements of the IRO role, including the use of mid-point reviews, escalation processes, and the recording of the child's voice. This has supported greater consistency in how IROs approach their statutory responsibilities.
- **Professional Development:** Targeted training and guest speaker sessions have been used to deepen understanding of key issues, such as permanence planning, trauma-informed practice, and legal frameworks. These opportunities have helped align practice across the team and ensure a shared understanding of best practice.
- **Monthly case audits:** these continue to consider the effectiveness of the IRO in planning for individual children. Most audit gradings fall within the 'Requires Improvement to be Good' category. The findings are used to drive quality, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. Our aim for 2025/2026 is to see a minimum of 25% of audits graded as 'Good' and none graded as inadequate. During the year monthly data collection started see below:-

Month	Good	RI	IA
February 25		100%	
March 25		83%	17%

This will be measured every quarter going forward so that we can add and review the progress in the next annual report.

Priority 2. Strengthening the Voice of the Child in Review Meetings

Ensuring that children and young people are meaningfully involved in their review meetings remains a core priority for Halton's Independent Reviewing Service. Over the past year, several steps have been taken to improve how children contribute to their reviews and how their views are captured and acted upon:

- **Flexible and Child-Centred Approaches:** IROs have continued to adapt their approach to suit the individual needs and preferences of each child. This includes offering different formats for participation—such as virtual attendance, written contributions, or pre-meeting discussions—to ensure that every child has a voice, even if they choose not to attend in person. A breakdown of how children chose to participate is below. [\(Link to Section\)](#) We have maintained a strong focus on child-centred review meetings, ensuring that the child's voice remains central throughout the process. Partner agencies are expected to contribute meaningfully during the care planning stage, rather than at the review, to support a more coordinated and proactive approach to planning.

Review meetings are deliberately kept small to create a more comfortable environment for children. In consultation with each child, we ensure they have a say in who attends their meeting—respecting their preferences and promoting their engagement and participation.

- **Follow-Up with Non-Attending Young People:** Where children and young people do not attend their review meetings, IROs have made proactive efforts to meet, or have discussion with them after the review. These conversations aim to understand the reasons for non-attendance and explore what could be done differently to make the process more inclusive and comfortable. Feedback from these discussions is used to inform future planning and adapt the review process accordingly.
- **Improved Recording of Consultation:** The service has placed greater emphasis on how children's views are recorded and reflected in care plans. IROs are expected to clearly document how the child has been consulted, what their views are, and how these have influenced decision-making. This is monitored through regular case audits and supervision.
- **Use of Advocacy and Support Tools:** Where appropriate, children are supported by independent advocates to help them express their views. IROs also make use of tools such as "All About Me" forms and creative methods to help younger children or those with communication needs share their thoughts and feelings.
- **Audit and Feedback Loops:** Monthly audits now include a focus on the quality of child participation and how well their voice is represented in the review process. Findings are used to identify good practice and areas for improvement, which are then addressed through supervision and team learning.
- **Ongoing Development:** The team continues to explore new ways to engage children and young people more effectively, including through feedback surveys, consultation with the Children in Care Council, and learning from national best practice. The IRO team is committed to actively engaging with the Children in Care Council to ensure that our service development is shaped by the voices of those with lived experience. Through regular dialogue with the participation lead, joint workshops, and feedback sessions, we work in partnership to understand what matters most to children and young people in care. Their insights directly inform our practice, helping us to improve review processes, enhance communication, and ensure that every child's rights, needs, and aspirations are at the heart of our service. This collaborative approach strengthens accountability and ensures that our work remains responsive, inclusive, and child-centred.

These efforts reflect a sustained commitment to ensuring that children are not only heard but that their views are central to care planning and decision-making.

Together these three priorities last year have contributed to a more consistent and accountable IRO service, with improved oversight of children's care plans and a stronger focus on achieving timely, child-centred outcomes.

Safeguarding Units Focus for 2025 – 2026

Priority 1: Strengthening IRO Effectiveness in Permanence Planning

Ensuring timely and effective permanence planning remains a key focus. In 2025–2026, the service will:

- Embed permanence-focused discussions in monthly reflective supervision
- Introduce tracking tools in Eclipse to monitor permanence progress
- Deliver targeted training on permanence pathways (e.g. SGO, adoption)
- Strengthen use of the Dispute Resolution Process to escalate delays
- Promote multi-agency collaboration through mid-point reviews and planning meetings
- Prioritise the child's voice in all planning decisions
- Review step-down processes to ensure sustained progress post-intervention

These actions align with Halton's wider improvement plan and national guidance, with progress monitored through audits, performance data, and feedback.

Priority 2: Enhancing Children and Young People's Participation

Improving how children contribute to their reviews is a core priority. The service will:

- Offer flexible, age-appropriate consultation methods
- Adapt review formats to be more child-friendly
- Follow up with non-attenders to understand and address barriers
- Improve recording of how children's views influence decisions
- Build trust through consistent, relational contact
- Monitor participation data to identify and address engagement gaps

These efforts support Halton's commitment to child-centred practice and will be informed by ongoing feedback from children and professionals.

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16th July 2025

Reviewed at Head of Service Meeting 24th July 2025