

PLANT YNG NGHYMURU
CHILDREN IN WALES

IRM Cymru Annual Report

2022 - 2023

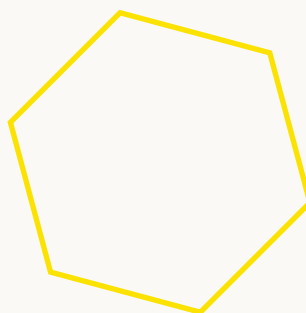
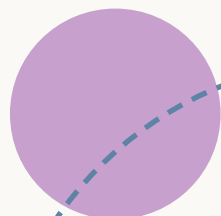


**Children in Wales annual report on development,
statistics and trends in the Independent Review
Mechanism - on behalf of Welsh Government**

Claire Sharp and Rachel Robinson | December 2023

Contents

Introduction.....	3
What is the purpose of the IRM?.....	4
Background to the IRM.....	4
Role of the IRM Panel.....	5
Suitability to foster or adopt.....	5
Disclosure of Information.....	6
Applications to the IRM.....	7
Applications received by Agency - 2022 - 2023.....	8
Outcome of Panels - recommendations.....	8
Applicants Feedback on the IRM.....	9
Who sits on an IRM Panel?.....	9
Panel Members.....	10
How does a Panel get put together?.....	10
Annual appraisals of panel members took place in summer 2023.....	12
Training & Development Opportunities for Central Panel List Members.....	14
Specific Needs.....	14
Responding to general enquiries.....	15
Developments in 2022 - 2023.....	16
2023 - 2024.....	17



Introduction

The Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) was introduced in order to increase public confidence in the transparency of the approvals process, and to encourage more people to consider fostering or adopting some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

We are a small team working part time consisting of:



Claire Sharp
Contract Manager



Rachel Robinson
IRM Administrator

What is the purpose of the IRM?

To increase public confidence in the transparency of the process for approving people as suitable to foster or adopt children, and to encourage more people to consider fostering or adopting some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

Background to the IRM

An IRM service had been in operation since 2005 (operated by Welsh Government). Initially reviews only related to decisions about suitability to adopt. The Independent Review of Determinations (Adoption and Fostering) (Wales) Regulations 2010 and The Fostering Services (Amendment) Wales Regulations 2010 came into force in April 2010 extending the remit of the IRM to include fostering. The IRM has been hosted by Children in Wales since September 2015 who operate the service on behalf of Welsh Government.



Role of the IRM Panel

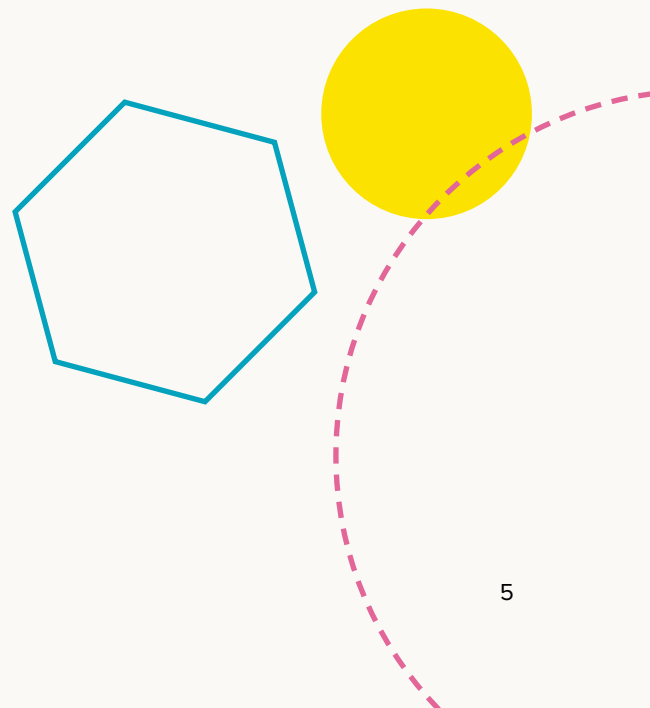
Suitability to foster or adopt

The IRM receives applications from individuals who have received a 'qualifying determination' from an agency about their suitability to act as foster carers or adoptive parents, this offers the opportunity for the situation to be reviewed by an independent panel before the final decision is made by the agency. This includes local authorities and independent fostering and adoption services.

The IRM review panel is not an appeal, it is a review and it cannot overturn the service providers qualifying determination. It can however make a fresh recommendation to the service provider on suitability to foster or adopt a child and/or the terms of approval.

The review panel will make its recommendation after it has taken into account the information that was put before the original panel, and any additional information that may have been submitted for consideration by the IRM panel such as:

- Any relevant information received by the service provider after the papers had been sent to the original panel.
- The IRM application and grounds.
- Any further information requested by the IRM from applicants or the fostering/ adoption service provider.



Disclosure of Information

The other area where the IRM Panel can give a recommendation is to adopted adults who were adopted on or after the 30th December 2005, or to the birth relative of someone adopted on or after that date. Two areas can be considered:

- That the agency will not proceed with an application for the disclosure of protected information, or
- That it will disclose the information against the will of the subject of the information.

The IRM has not received any such applications to date, however it is anticipated that due to the age of people affected by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 reaching adulthood this may be a growing area for recommendations requiring an independent review.

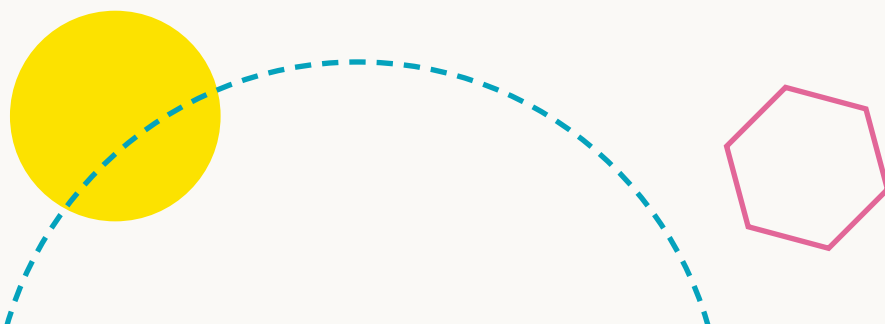
In order to increase awareness about the purpose and process of the IRM, Claire Sharp Contract Manager has attended a number of Special Interest Groups arranged through Association for Fostering, Kinship and Adoption Cymru (AFKA), including Panel Chairs, Independent Reviewing Officers, Special Guardianship Orders, Kinship Carers, and Legal Advisors. These workshops have not only increased awareness and allowed for interesting discussions on practice but also helped support the development of useful contacts and recruitment of new panel members. Claire has also given presentations to adoption and foster panels in local authorities encouraging a fuller understanding of what an independent review can offer to applicants and agencies, and ensuring that people eligible for the service are offered this option.



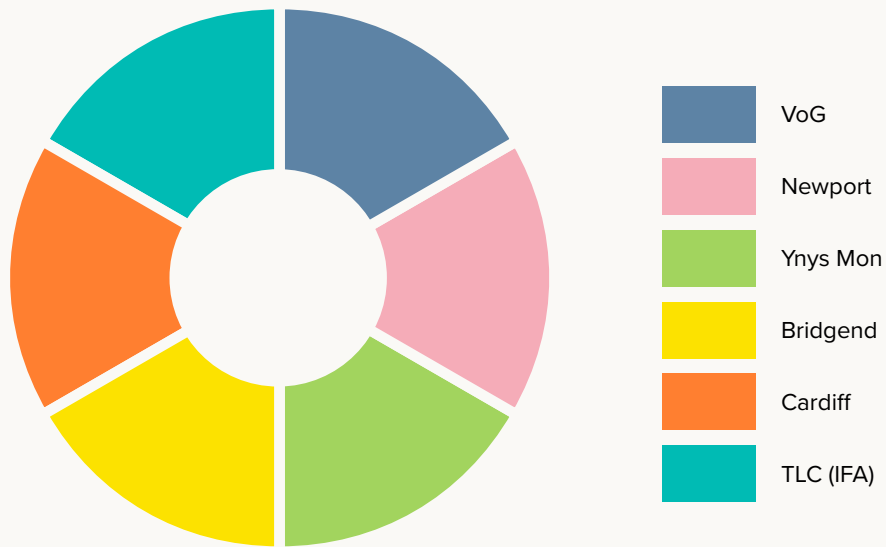
Applications to the IRM

Due to the small numbers of applications some details and quotations have been edited to maintain anonymity.

Number of applications received in this period	6
Number of applications accepted	5 (1 applicant was eligible but decided not to proceed after discussion with contract manager)
Applications received from (agency) 3 completed 1 withdrawn 1 halted due to change in circumstances 1 panel due to be held in next reporting year	Cardiff (1) Newport (1) Ynys Mon (1) Vale of Glamorgan (1) Bridgend (1) Independent Foster Care Agency (1)
Types of application by category	Fostering - 6 Adoption - 0 Disclosure of Information - 0
Types of application by applicant status	Mainstream foster carers - 2 Connected Persons - 4
Types of application	Deregistration (3) Suitability to foster (3)
Number of Review Panels that took place in this period	Six Panels completed One panel was discontinued as the situation changed Four panels related to applications that were submitted in this contract year (Aug 22- July 23) Two panels were held on applications received in the previous contract year (Aug 21-July 22)



Applications received by Agency - 2022-2023



Outcome of Panels - recommendations

During the reporting year, the IRM have concurred with 4 of the 6 Agency Qualifying Determinations and disagreed with 2 Agency Determinations.



Applicants Feedback on the IRM

Following each Review Panel, a questionnaire link to an online form is issued to all parties, asking for feedback on the service provided to them by the IRM, the following comments were received in a case where the IRM Panel recommendation did not concur with the Agency's QD:

"This was a game changer in our case. Coming to IRM helped us get the justice we really wanted. We were supported, given advice and we were well informed which really made it possible for us to get the justice when we were unfairly deregistered as foster carers and were almost losing custody for the children. The IRM recommendations helped our case during our court proceedings. Thank you we are forever grateful and really appreciate the work you do which is not biased."

Who sits on an IRM Panel?

The IRM is independent of the agency providing the fostering or adoption service and the panel considering the review will have no members connected with the case. Applicants receive the names of the IRM panel members who will consider the case and can notify the IRM if they believe a particular review panel member should not be on the panel for their case.

The IRM holds its panels virtually, however a face to face panel could be arranged in exceptional circumstances to meet a specific need. There is also the option of technical support for applicants less confident with online meetings. The arrangements for Panels are constantly under review and amendments continue to be made to enable the process to run as smoothly as possible for all concerned.

Virtual panels mean that the IRM is more accessible to all applicants without the need for travel to venues. Once the IRM accepts an application, they will let applicants know the date and time of the panel that will consider their case and aim for all panels to be held within 3 months.

It is important that the IRM constantly reviews processes and keeps up to date with current research and evolving practices in the field of social care. When assessing suitability to foster children the panel consider the information that they have heard against a set of competencies. For mainstream foster carers the IRM use the BAAF competencies for fostering. A significant change in the current reporting year was the adoption of the Kinship/Connected Persons Competencies developed by Association of Fostering, Kinship and Adoption Cymru (AFKA) on behalf of the Welsh Government to reflect the specific nature and challenges of caring for children when they and key family members are known to the foster carers.

Panel Members

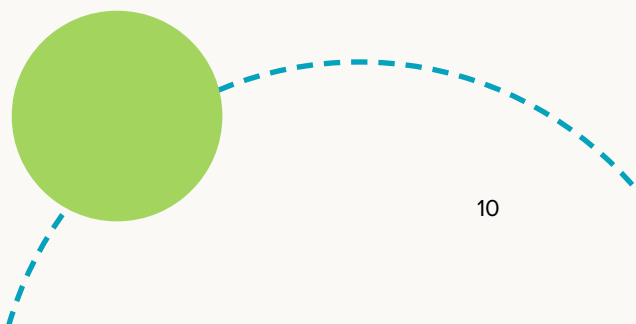
The IRM recruits and maintains a Central List of people who can be called on to take part in a review. The fostering regulations refer to a list of people, 'suitable by virtue of their skills, qualifications or experience'. Each case is considered by a panel whose members have personal or professional experience of child placements but no connection with the case under review. Panels also have non-voting members to support the process including a panel advisor and a secretary; legal and medical advice is sought to provide additional information and context to the panel, and they remain available by phone if there is an unresolved matter that arises during the Panel discussion.

How does a Panel get put together?

When an application comes to IRM and is accepted, a new Panel is put together from the central list. Each Panel will need someone to act as the Chair and also a Panel Advisor who must be a qualified Social Worker, to advise on whether the information being shared and recommendations made are compliant with the Independent Review of Determinations (Adoption and Fostering) (Wales) Regulations 2010 and The Fostering Services (Amendment) Wales Regulations 2010.

An IRM Panel usually has between 5-7 people sitting including the Chair, and must include at least 2 Social Workers who have recent or current experience of adoption and fostering services. The remaining places are made up of Lay Members who have relevant skills and experience. It is good practice to have some members who have direct experience that relate to the nature of the application i.e. mainstream foster carers if the application is about the deregistration of a mainstream foster carer. We aim to have a mix of people on a Panel taking account of characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity as well as lived experience.

In addition to managing the casework relating to applications during the past year, the IRM Cymru have remained focussed on the development of the Central Panel List. It is important that the members of the IRM have skills and experience relevant to a wide range of applicants. We are committed to broadening the representation on the panels of people who have lived experience of fostering and adoption, who are care experienced, current foster carers, or adoptive parents. An understanding of the impact of early trauma is very important when considering suitability to provide a caring home for a child who is unable to live with their birth parents.



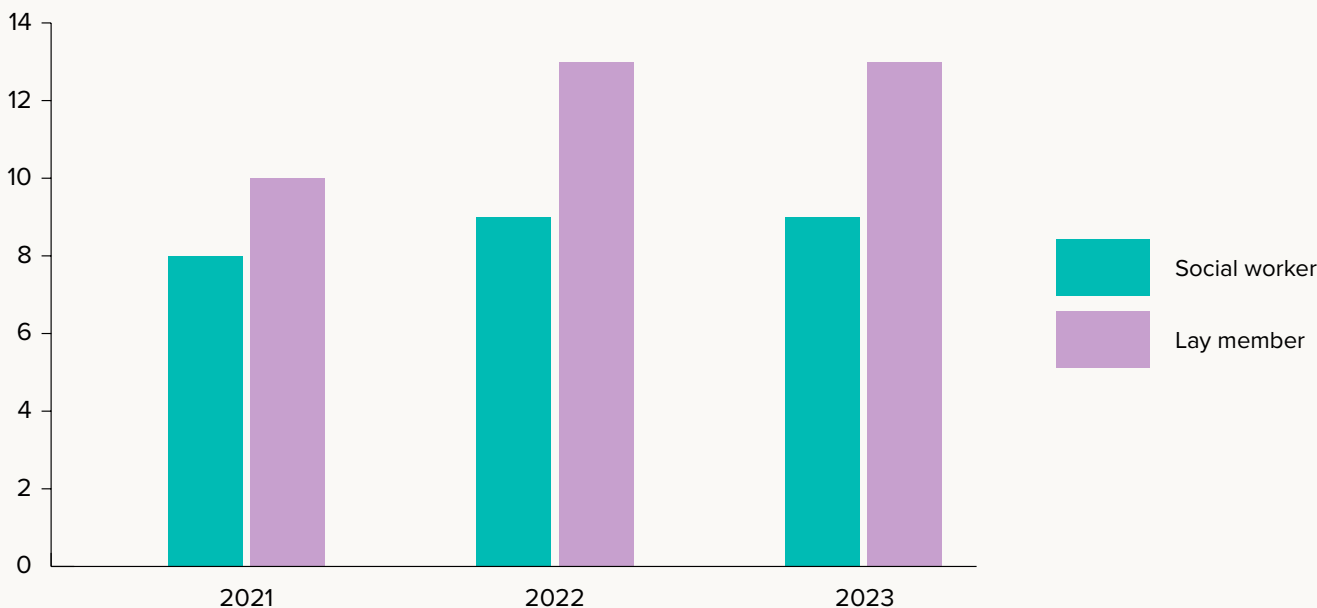
The IRM has developed and implemented an electronic EDI monitoring form for panel members and applicants, including a system for ensuring that the information is returned securely and anonymously. The aim is to use this information to benchmark where the panel membership is now, in order to monitor changes in diversity over time.

There is no fixed number of members who should be on the central list however it is important to have sufficient numbers to be able to meet the requirements of running a Panel that is diverse and truly independent. It is positive to have a mix of panel members with long standing experience of the IRM and those who come fresh to the process. During this year the IRM has not had any members resign, with the number remaining at 22 members of which 10 are registered Social Workers and 12 are Lay Members. We are however in the process of recruiting new members to compliment the experience of existing members, and are actively seeking panel members with experience of kinship care as this is the issue that we have the most applications about.

New members are provided with an opportunity to observe IRM panels before taking an active role. The Contract Manager provides post observation interviews with all new members to gain views of the process from a fresh 'pair of eyes'.

The total number of current panel members at July 2023 stands at 22

Members of the Central Panel List:



The gender makeup of the Central Panel List:

	2021	2022	2023
Male	3	6	6
Female	15	16	16

Annual appraisals of panel members took place in summer 2023

The following comments provide some insight into the experience of taking part in an IRM panel.

What are you most proud of about working as an IRM panel member?

Anonymised responses

I am incredibly proud of the IRM because I feel it gives a voice to foster carers and indeed Agencies to voice their points of view over the issues involved whereas they may have previously felt unheard or misrepresented beforehand. It also ensures an extra accountability to the child or young person concerned. I feel children and young people are at the heart of the IRM and that all Panel members hold dearly this principle.

I feel able to express my view even if it is different to the rest of Panel members

The IRM is well organised and there is good communication between professionals, with mutual respect for one another's expertise. It enables those who have a QD to have their voices heard, and to undergo a fair and transparent process.

Ensuring that applicants are given a fair hearing. Promoting good practice to ensure that the Fostering Service Provider are adhering to regulatory requirements. Keeping children with their families when the recommendation was to terminate the foster carer's approval status.

Safeguarding children.

I am proud that the IRM is available to allow people to have their circumstances revisited by a panel of unbiased individuals who are making a recommendation from a professional point of view with no personal involvement.

I am proud of how I have settled into the role, come out of my comfort zone and challenged myself professionally. I feel my feedback is always fair having listened to both sides and can relate my own experiences as a foster carer to some of the situations discussed.

That it enables applicants / foster carers to have a right to challenge decisions and that it provides a quality assurance role within maintaining standards of fostering in Wales.

What have you found most challenging?

The best interests of the child must always be the major consideration, and it is sometimes difficult to recommend that someone who loves that child very much is nonetheless not able to provide a safe, caring home for them.

The outcome of the recommendations that we make as a collective group and the emotional and life changing effect that it may have on the applicant.

What do you see as your main strengths?

Ability to analyse and assimilate information. Organised in thinking, good listening skills, many years of managing an adoption and fostering service.

To listen, be curious, critically evaluate information, to give an informed opinion.

Having been a foster carer for 7 years I can relate to the role and the professional expectations and realities of caring for children in the care system. I am very passionate about promoting the role of foster care.

I always listen to the views of others and am prepared to change my own if my fellow panel members present opinions which I had not considered or which make me see something from another angle.

The true independence of the panel and its ability to cast a fresh eye on decisions. The feedback from carers and adopters about feeling listened to.



Training & Development Opportunities for Central Panel List Members

The training and development of our Central Panel List Members remains a focus and during the last year, the following training and development has taken place with both events well attended and positive feedback received:

- Legal Context of the IRM – Alexandra Conroy Harris, November 2022
- Disclosure of Information Workshop, and application of the new Kinship Competencies – Sarah Coldrick, November 2022
- Completion of Form for Panel Chair – Val Owen, June 2023

In addition, we are able to provide a debrief session after a IRM Panel, which may include both Heather Payne, Medical Advisor and Alexandra Conroy Harris, Legal Advisor.

The IRM funded one of our members to attend Panel Advisor Training which was provided by AFKA in November 2022 which they found very informative.

Specific Needs

The IRM Cymru checks at an early stage in the review process if there is any disability or impairment that the applicants or agency representatives might have that would need to be taken into account in arranging a Panel. There were no requests in year for such consideration. There were no requests to hear any application through the medium of Welsh during this year. There was also no requests for translation into other languages.



Responding to general enquiries

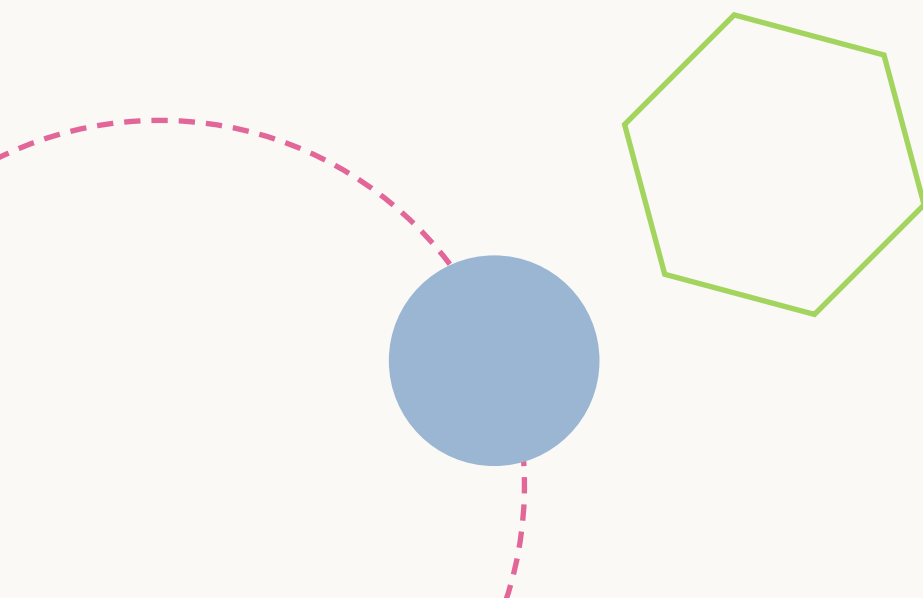
The IRM is also approached by people who are unhappy with the way that they have been treated by their fostering or adoption agency but are not eligible for a panel review. These people are listened to and, where appropriate, signposted to the agency complaints process or to other independent sources of support including their Members of the Senedd, the Children Commissioner for Wales and charitable organisations providing support around Fostering and Adoption. The IRM ensure that applicants are aware of the support services provided through Kinship and Fostering Network.



Developments in 2022 - 2023

The IRM has continued to develop the full transformation to a digital service with all documents being sent and received electronically wherever possible. During the current reporting year, the IRM Contract Manager and Contract Administrator have continued to develop the administration structure of the IRM as follows:

- Monitoring – an online form for all applicant(s) and panel members to ensure the take-up/diversity of both Applicants and Panels is representative and balanced.
- Access and security of information shared - the development and launch of a secure Share Point site for our Central Panel List Members which provides a single point for everything IRM, improving the way we share information and enhanced security around the way panel members access confidential documents.
- Centralised Recording - we have developed an Excel document, which has replaced a number of separate documents, where all case information is held to include; contact details, checklist, deadlines, Panel, progress sheet and timelines.
- Public Information – we have continued to review and develop the website with workshops held to coproduce information with interested parties.
- Increased accessibility and ease of use – all information that needs to be submitted by applicants and panel members can now be returned via online forms instead of downloaded documents.



2023 – 2024

We will continue to review processes and procedures going into the next reporting year with some of our goals being:

- Compliance with data protection – to ensure all non IRM generated documents are deleted and the issue of an online form to Panel Members confirming as such.
- Increase awareness of the IRM with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) – Identify all IFAs operating in Wales, maintain a database, establish regular communication and invitation to workshops to ensure compliance with Fostering Regulations.
- Maintain and increase partnership with AFKA Cymru to ensure that all relevant parties understand the role of IRM and ensure access to the service to those who are eligible.
- Recruitment to Central Panel – improvement of processes including role descriptions and applications forms to ensure that the central list contains members from diverse backgrounds.

