

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING
OFFICER SERVICE**

ANNUAL REPORT

April 2015 – March 2016

**The Contribution of Independent Reviewing
Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving
Services for Looked After Children**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the tenth annual report of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service in Bracknell Forest. This report will cover the period from 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016.

The IRO Handbook states that the annual report should cover:

- The development of the IRO Service, caseloads, make up of the team and how this reflects the identity of the Looked after Children population in Bracknell Forest.
- The extent of participation of children, young people and parents.
- Performance data including the number of reviews held within timescales and reasons for those held outside of timescales.
- Procedures for resolving concerns, the local dispute resolution process and analysis of issues raised and outcomes.
- Resource issues affecting the services provided for Looked after Children.
- The report of the IRO service should also; *'Identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development including where urgent action is needed'*.

The report begins with a summary of some of the key areas of progress in response to areas for development identified in previous reports and in national research.

The report identifies the legal framework for the work of the IRO Service and identifies areas that are felt to be at the centre of the service and progresses to provide an introduction to the team and information about the development of the IRO service in Bracknell Forest.

A profile of looked after children shows key information including numbers, age, gender and ethnicity. The legal status of children is shown and performance information about the timeliness of reviews, IRO caseloads and how IROs are fulfilling the requirements in the IRO Handbook 2010.

The participation of children and young people, parents and carers and the contribution of partner agencies is detailed including a case study and comments from children and young people who are looked after. Listening to the voice of the child and enabling children and young people to participate is a key function of the IRO role. Performance in this area remains strong overall and efforts to build on this through creative involvement of children chairing their own reviews are actively developed by the team.

There has been a significant focus on the development of quality assurance and performance monitoring including reporting to Senior Managers and to the Director Children, Young People and Learning. This is a key part of the IRO role and provides a good opportunity to feed back on key performance, practice and development issues.

The report demonstrates work undertaken to further embed challenge and dispute resolution processes. Such processes provide a mechanism to assist the IRO Service in fulfilling their independent function and to make challenges where there is drift in the care plan or it is felt that decisions and actions are not contributing to good outcomes for the child or young person. Some examples given in this section demonstrate the challenge that has taken place and the positive responses from Children's Social Care to addressing those challenges. This section also highlights good practice examples.

The final section identifies a range of issues that impact on services for looked after children as well as reviewing of IRO caseloads and examining trends in numbers of children looked after and ensuring caseloads for individual IRO's allow capacity for them to fulfil their statutory function.

A list of areas for development in 2016/17 concludes the 10th annual report.

A SUMMARY OF KEY AREAS OF PROGRESS DURING 2015/16

IRO pre Looked After Children (LAC) review meetings with children and young people take place for all children in care to improve participation in the decision making process for the child.

IRO's are now regularly invited to participate in key meetings for the child, including permanency planning meetings, disruption and multi-agency professional meetings on a consistent basis to improve the child's timescales and ensure independent oversight.

There has been on going work in partnership with Children Social Care to improve the quarterly audit report and identify themes relating to LAC children with a view to the information being used to improve the outcomes for looked after children

IRO service has worked in partnership with the leaving care service to create a pathway plan user friendly document

IRO service has provided on going training in LAC processes to new workers - regular sessions offered on a quarterly basis

IRO service has continued to make links and work closely with other agencies for example, regular involvement in Life Chances group, actively supporting SILSIP (Children in Care Council), regular meetings with LAC nurse for up dates and Sexual Exploitation and Missing Risk Assessment Conference (SEMRAC) meetings to ensure the child's wellbeing needs are pro-actively addressed.

IRO and Cafcass Guardian meetings across pan-Berkshire take place three times per year in order the building of positive working relationships to improve outcomes for children involved in court proceedings.

1. PURPOSE OF SERVICE AND LEGAL CONTEXT

1.1 The Independent Review Officer (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook 2010, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011 and updated in June 2015 . The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the Review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Looked After Children (LAC) and for challenging drift and delay.

1.2 National Children's Bureau research entitled 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings in regards to the efficacy of IRO services and outlines a number of important recommendations.

1.3 The IRO Service in Bracknell Forest wishes to highlight areas we believe to be essential part of the service:

- Ensuring IRO's have the right skills: particularly the ability to communicate with children and young people, and to know how and when to challenge.
- Have access to expert advice & resources, including independent legal advice and opportunities for reflective practice.
- Dispute resolution protocols that work, from informal conversations to the escalation of formal disputes to senior management level.
- Ensuring 'child-centred' IRO's, who demonstrate their commitment to each child and work out the best way to seek their views.

- Having a focus on outcomes, and holding agencies to account for their contribution towards these.

The foreword was written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; in it he makes the following comment



The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing.

Further research funded by Economic and Social Research Council entitled 'Care Planning & the Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (October 2015) reinforces the importance of this role to effective care planning for children in need of permanency.

2. PROFILE OF THE IRO SERVICE

2.1 The legislation and regulations specify;

- The duty of the local authority to appoint an IRO.
- The circumstances in which the local authority must consult with the IRO.
- The functions of the IRO both in relation to the reviewing and monitoring of each case.
- The actions the IRO must take if the local authority is failing to comply with the regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child in any material way, including making a referral to CAFCASS.

2.2 The IRO Service sits within a larger team called the Conference and Review Team. This team provides Independent Reviewing Officers to chair reviews for Looked after Children, and Independent Child Protection Chairs to chair Child Protection Conferences.

2.3 In order to provide independence from the line management of cases and allocation of resources within Children's Social Care, the IRO Service sits within the Strategy, Resources and Early Intervention Branch of the Department. The Independent Reviewing Officers are managed by the Conference and Review Team Manager who reports to the Head of Performance Management and Governance. The Director for Children, Young People and Learning retains overall accountability of the Service.

2.4 The staffing complement for the IRO Service is:

- Conference and Review Team Manager (37 hours per week) - this role manages the IRO's, Child Protection Chairs and is also the Local Authority Designated Officer for allegations against the workforce.
- One full time Independent Reviewing Officer (37 hours per week)
- Two Part time Independent Reviewing Officer (combined 34.5 hours per week)
- Administration support is provided by a small team supporting both the IRO process and Child Protection Conferencing.
- The Independent Reviewing Officers in the team are all female and White British.

During this review period there have been a number of changes within the team. These changes have included the appointment of a new permanent Head of Service and a Team Manager. We have also welcomed back one of the part time IRO's who has returned after 6 months maternity leave.

2.5 Every child who becomes looked after by the local authority is allocated an IRO within 5 days of becoming looked after. The Officers hold a case discussion meeting before making a decision as to who will become allocated as IRO. The decision is made based on the availability of the IRO and any previous connection the IRO may have with the child. Where possible, to provide the child with consistency the same IRO will chair the reviews and monitor the care plan throughout the period the child is looked after.

2.6 All looked after children; including children who are in an adoptive placement prior to an adoption order have a LAC Review. This applies to all children who are the subject of a care order (under section 31 of the Children Act 1989), or who are voluntarily accommodated for a period of more than 24 hours (section 20 of the Children Act 1989), including those described in this report as in Short Break Care, or who are placed for adoption under the Adoption and Children Act 2002. It also covers those who are compulsorily looked after such as those remanded by the court to local authority accommodation.

2.7 During this review period the IRO Service has also taken responsibility to oversee the care planning for a child in welfare secure accommodation and a child in an international adoption case. These are both exceptional cases and are additional pieces of work for the IRO's involved.

2.8.1 The IRO Handbook recommends that a caseload for a full time IRO should be between 50-70 children. The current case load of the full time IRO in Bracknell has a case load of 53 children. This figure fluctuates throughout the year due to the nature of the work but there is a commitment within the service to keep figures within the national guidelines.

3. PROFILE OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN IN BRACKNELL FOREST

3.1 On the 31 March 2016 there were 98 children and young people who were looked after. This is a slight decrease from the 31 March 2015 where the number of looked after children was 104.

3.2 The number of children who are looked after can vary from month to month as children move in and out of the system. During the period of 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016, 62 children have become LAC and 69 have ceased to be LAC. Children can cease to be LAC for a number of reasons which include for example returning home to live with parents, adoption, or leaving care.

- 3.3 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2016, **38** were female and **60** were male.
- 3.4 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2016:
- **4** were under the age of one.
 - **8** were aged one to four.
 - **14** were aged five to nine.
 - **43** were aged ten to fifteen.
 - **29** were aged sixteen and over.
- 3.5 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2016:
- 81 % (79 children) were identified as White British
- 3% (3 children) were identified as any other white background.
 - 16%(14 children) were identified from a range of other backgrounds including any other Asian (1%) , African (2%), White and Black African (1%), White and Black Caribbean (8%),White and Asian (1%), any other mixed background (1%), any other ethnic group (1%).

Legal Status

- 3.6 The legal status of children looked after on 31 March 2016 is shown in the table below, alongside figures for the same period in 2015. The comparator figures show an increase in the number of children subject to Full Care Orders and the continuing decrease of children looked after under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. (where a child is placed with consent of the parent) This is reflective of the current legal advice regarding the use of Section 20.

Legal Status	March 2015	March 2016
Care Order -Section 31 The Children Act 1989	35	47
Interim Care Order -Section 33 The Children Act 1989	9	15
Section 20 The Children Act 1989	41	30
Placement Order Adoption and Children Act 2002	19	6
On remand	0	0
Total	104	98

Legal status of LAC on 31 March 2015 and 31 March 2016

Adoption Activity

- 3.7 The introduction of Adopt Berkshire is now an established service with Bracknell Children Social Care working well with other three Berkshire Local Authorities. During this review period **9** adoption orders were made. **4** orders were made within 12

months of the agency decision maker's agreement **3** within 12-18 months and **2** were over 24 months.

Of the nine adoptions which have taken place during this review period three of the children were aged 5 and over (5 years, 6 years and 8 years) it has become a growing trend in Bracknell to provide permanency for older children through adoption.

Timeliness of Statutory Review

- 3.8 Under provisions set out in the IRO Handbook (2010) local authorities are required to review the case of any child who is looked after or provided with accommodation within the following timescales:
- The first review must take place within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after or is provided with accommodation.
 - The second review must be carried out no later than 3 months after the first review and subsequent reviews must be carried out not more than 6 months after the date of the previous review meeting.
- 3.9 Each IRO has a designated case load and is responsible for ensuring that each child's review takes place within timescales. The IRO also ensures that care planning is robust and that young people, parents, carers and relevant professionals have the opportunity to participate fully in the review process.
- 3.10 In certain situations it may be necessary to bring forward a child's review meeting if:
- There is a change of placement or other substantial change to the care plan.
 - The IRO has specific concerns about the child and directs that the review be brought forward.
 - There is a request from the child or parent for a review to be brought forward.
- 3.11 A total of **293** looked after children reviews were completed during the last year. This is slightly lower than in the previous year (**307**). However with there being fewer children looked after during this review period the number of reviews held still remains high. This is due to a number of different factors including changes to the child's care plan and unplanned placement moves.
- 3.12 On the 31st March 2016, 98% of LAC reviews were carried out within statutory timescales. Although this has remained a high percentage it is slightly down on the previous year (100%). Every effort is made to hold LAC reviews within the timescales set out in legislation. The 2% deficit equates to 2 LAC reviews (two children from one family placed in the same placement) The review meeting was one day over the allocated timescales due to the IRO's annual leave.
- 3.13 One area of important activity in ensuring that LAC reviews stay within timescales is close and effective liaison with Social Workers, this takes place via face to face contact and an email system is in place to notify workers of any new children becoming looked after, and also any changes in circumstances that may lead to a placement change.

4 PARTICIPATION IN REVIEWS

Child participation in LAC reviews

- 4.1 A central strand of the role of the IRO is to ensure that the voice of the child is central to the review process. During the year 99% of children aged four and above were able to participate in their LAC review meeting. This is a decrease of 1% from

the previous year. The 1% equates to one young person who chose not to partake in his review meeting. Every effort was made by the social worker and allocated IRO to encourage the young person to share his views. This was done through attempted visits, telephone calls and text messages.

The IRO's also visit children under 4 in their placements as part of the LAC review process. A number of different approaches are used by the IRO's to gain the views of the child dependent on their age and ability. A key approach is to observe very young children with their carers and other significant adults

Child Participation	Mar-13	Mar-14	Mar-15	Mar-16
Number who participated in all reviews	82	88		82
% of LAC who participated in reviews	100%	99%	100%	99%

Method of participation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Child under 4years old	12(19%)	11(14%)	12(17%)	11(13%)
Child attends the review and is able to speak for themselves	33(52%)	44(58%)	38(53%)	49(60%)
Child attends and an advocate speaks for them	1(2%)	0	0	0
Child attends and conveys their views non verbally	1(2%)	1(2%)	0	0
Child attends but does not speak or convey their feelings	0	0	0	0
Child does not attend but asks an advocate to speak for them	4(6%)	5(7%)	6(8%)	5(6%)
Child does not attend but conveys their views to the review	12(19%)	15(20%)	16(22%)	16(20%)
Child does not attend and does not convey their views to the review	0	0	0	1(1%)

4.2 It is recognised that for some children attending their LAC review meeting can be a daunting experience. In Bracknell Forest IROs are working hard to find imaginative ways to support children and young people to engage in the process and for their views, feelings and wishes to be heard. Some examples are:

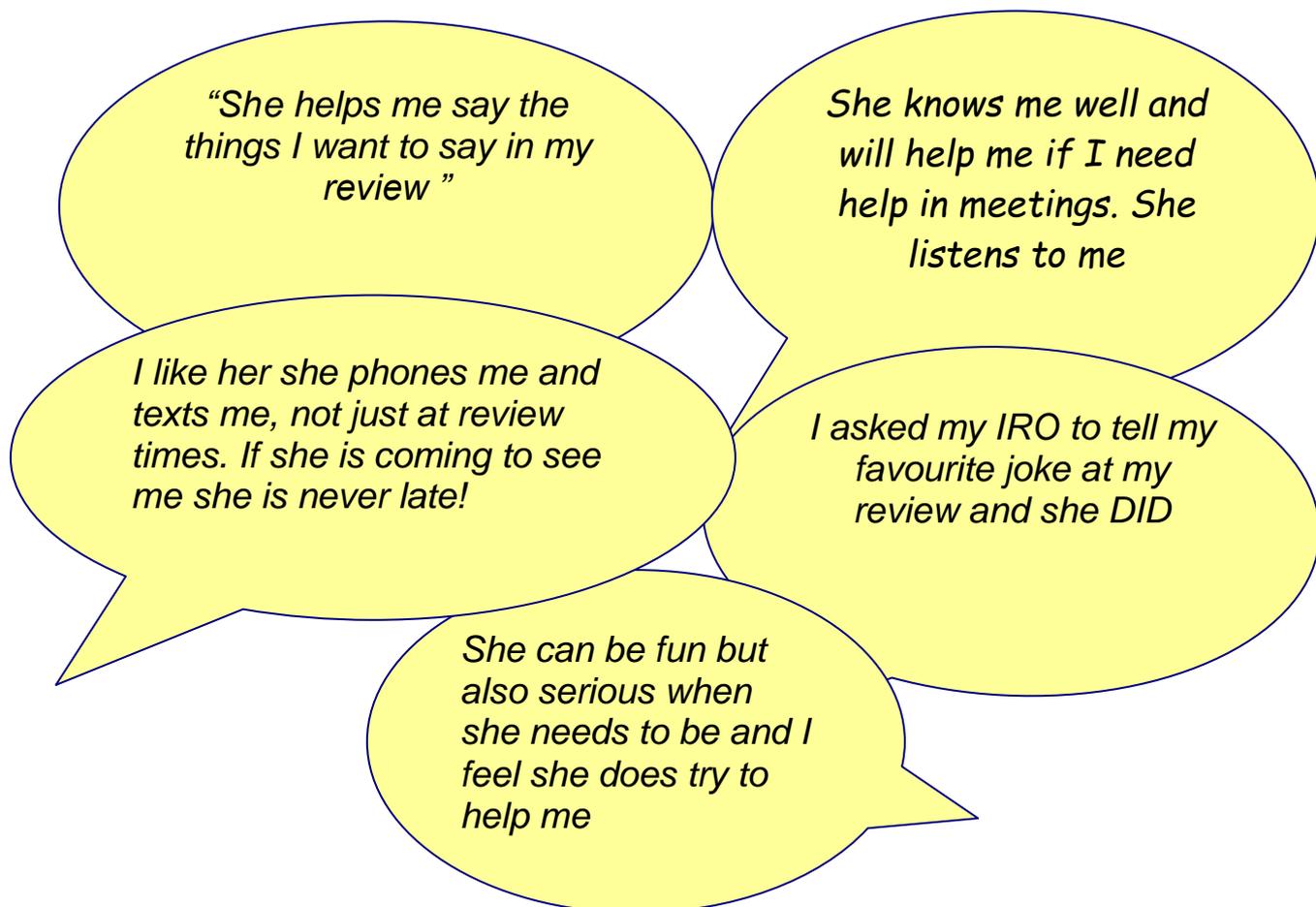
- Arranging a separate meeting with the child in the form of a pre review meeting. This is now a practice which is embedded in the planning of LAC reviews. All children are offered a pre review meeting including children who are placed outside of the Bracknell area which does impact on the IRO's time and workload. However the IRO's value the opportunity to meet with children and young people and feel that the introduction of pre review meetings has offered them to have a better understanding of the child's individual needs. It has also offered the children an opportunity to make a connection with their IRO. This has helped them to be more open and share their true thoughts and feelings with their IRO.
- The child being supported by a formal or informal advocate in the meeting.
- The child being supported to write a letter or draw pictures which are shared at the meeting.
- The child being supported to make a DVD to show at the review meeting.

- 4.3 The decision about the venue of a LAC review is based on the child's wishes, parental participation and safety issues. LAC reviews are held in the child's placement or at a venue that is considered appropriate such as the Family Centre, Children's Centre. This can be difficult as the number of vacant rooms is sometimes an issue.

Pre- LAC review meetings and IRO home visits to a child are held in a number of venues, depending on the child's wishes. The aim is not to hold meetings during the school day. Often these pre- meetings occur in the placement, but parks cafes etc are used at times.

Some LAC reviews were held over several meetings as it is not always appropriate for children to attend the whole meeting but it remains important for the child's voice to be heard. The IRO Service continues to promote participation by children and young people with disabilities. Careful consideration is given to the choice of venue and the support needs of the child to facilitate and encourage meaningful participation.

Promoting the Voice of the Child – Some examples of Children and Young People's Views



Case Study One – Child Participation

Two siblings aged 5 and 7 years old who have a significant speech and development delays wanted to be part of their review. The social worker and IRO wanted to encourage their enthusiasm to attend a meeting but also wanted an opportunity to discuss care planning and tasks with the significant adults involved in the care of the children. A decision was made for a 'mini review' to be arranged for the children. The IRO social worker and carers attended the meeting along with the children, Ollie Owl (cuddly toy) and Poppy the dog (cuddly toy). The boys chaired the meeting requesting that one of the carers took minutes and set the boundaries by telling the IRO and social worker they could ask questions. The children also made the decision as to whether the adults had earned a 'good listening' sticker and informed everyone when they were ready for the meeting to end by informing us that we only had five minutes left for questions and then it was play time.

Both children felt that they had taken part in their meeting and the IRO felt she had a good understanding of the views and feelings of the children through the role play and observing the children with their carers.

Case Study Two – Child Participation

A 12 year old girl spoke to her IRO before the planned LAC meeting stating she felt she would like to attend her formal meeting. In the past she had shared her views with the IRO before the meeting and the IRO had met with her after the meeting to give her feedback. The child informed the IRO that she was feeling nervous about speaking in front of a lot of adults.

The IRO was aware this child had performed in plays and dance shows and asked her what she does to stop being nervous before a show. The child said that it was easy as she wasn't nervous because she liked acting and singing and felt she was good at it.

After thinking about it the child and IRO decided it would be a good idea if at the start of the review the child would put on a short performance for everyone. She decided to play a piece on the piano for everyone.

This gave her the confidence to sit in the review meeting and share her views.

Parental participation in LAC reviews

- 4.4 The IRO has a responsibility to gain the views of parents within the review process, this is important as it helps the IRO to understand the way in which the child is viewed by parents and to gain an idea of the life experiences of the child. One exception is that birth parents do not attend LAC review meetings when a child is on a placement order and about to be placed for adoption. Their views are sought and communicated to the meeting but they do not attend. There are many ways a parent can be involved including:
- Attending the formal meeting.
 - Completing and returning consultation documents.
 - A separate meeting can be arranged with the allocated IRO.
 - Telephone / email communication with the allocated IRO.
 - Via a Social worker / Advocate.
- 4.5 During the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016, a total of **129** parents (mothers and fathers) attended their child's review meeting. Of these only **28** were fathers. The IRO Service has recognised the low figures for attendance by fathers and aim to improve the opportunities for father's to participate in the LAC review meetings of their children during the next review period.

Others shared their views through a conversation with the IRO by telephone or completed consultation documents. Some parents chose to use other forms of communication such as email, text, using advocates, giving views to the child's social worker or having a separate meeting with the IRO. Some parents' views were not obtained, this is due to a number of reasons including the parent being deceased, their whereabouts unknown, a Placement Order being in place or the child having been placed in an adoptive placement.

Participation and contribution of partner agencies

- 4.6 Participation from partner agencies is strong in Bracknell Forest. Health visitors often attend review meetings and give detailed information on the child's progress. Schools, the Virtual School team and any specialist units are usually actively involved in relation to educational progress. The IRO Service welcomes the attendance of members of the CAMHS medical team at some LAC reviews and will continue to encourage and report on progress in this respect.
- 4.7 The IROs meet with the LAC nurse every four months to discuss the wider issues relating to the health of LAC and their views about having medicals. The introduction of this process has supported the IRO to have a good overview of the child's health needs when preparing for a LAC review meeting. The IRO Service also have access to the LAC nurse via the multi agency Life Chances Team and also communicate via email to raise any concerns regarding the well being of individual children.
- 4.8 Looked after children of school age have a PEP meeting within 20 days of becoming LAC and then at six monthly intervals. The IRO Service has a good relationship with the Virtual School Team and is able to communicate regularly through email to address issues. Members of the Virtual School will attend LAC review meetings when there are specific educational issues to be addressed. The IRO Service welcomes the support provided by the Virtual School in the planning of post 16 education for looked after children. It should be noted that there has been an increase of interest from looked after children wishing to explore opportunities to work towards attending university. Members of the virtual school are very encouraging and will go 'the extra mile' by attending university open days and supporting the young person to complete UCAS forms.
- 4.9 The IRO Service ensures a member of the team is available to attend the Life Chances meetings and uses this opportunity to raise issues relating to individual children and also to highlight identified service deficits. Regular attendance at Life Chances meetings has supported the IRO Service to build good communication links with multi agency professionals involved in the LAC process.
- 4.10 The IRO Service has continued to work with the Child Participation Development Officer to encourage children and young people to develop skills to enable them to share their feelings and views regarding their care arrangements in positive ways during LAC review meetings and to have the support of advocates if requested. One of the tasks of the Child Participation Development Officer is to support Looked After Children in Bracknell Forest to have a say via the SILSIP Group (Say it Loud Say it Proud). Members of the IRO Service have attended SILSIP activities including 'Ready Steady Cook' sessions, water sport activities and other events during the school holidays. The IRO Service sees this as a great opportunity to spend time with children and young people outside of the formal LAC review meeting.
- 4.11 IRO Service continues to promote the 'Do You Know' training provided by SILSIP to new social workers joining Bracknell Forest and newly recruited foster carers.
- 4.12 The Youth Offending Team is invited to the young person's LAC review meeting when they are involved. The contribution of the YOS worker in the LAC review process continues to be of a high standard which supports the LAC review process.

- 4.13 Members of the IRO service have attended the Berkshire CAF/CASS liaison meetings. While there has historically been challenges around being able to attend these meetings due to conflicting priorities a process is in place when a Guardian is allocated to a Bracknell Forest looked after child to enable the IRO and Guardian to have an open line of communication throughout the court process to ensure the child's views are heard

5. PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Performance Monitoring

Quality Assurance of the IRO Service

- 5.1 The IRO service has continued to develop a team audit programme which quality assures aspects of the IRO's work. This includes themed audits, which this year included an audit of the dispute resolution process, peer auditing of reports and decisions and actions, observations of IRO's by the Team Manager and Head of Service and auditing of administrative processes. We aim to develop this further in the coming year, particularly in respect of themed audits and peer auditing.

Management Oversight

- 5.2 A key aspect of the IRO Service is in supporting ongoing quality assurance activity as part of the Quality Assurance Strategy for the Children, Young People & Learning Department. The IRO service reports on a regular basis to Childrens Social Care Management Team by way of a quarterly performance report. This report provides a range of qualitative and quantitative information taken from an audit form completed by the IRO after each LAC Review. The information collected from the audit activity is collated into a quarterly report and presented to senior managers in Childrens Social Care. This is an opportunity to highlight good practice and note areas for improvements as well as highlighting performance against local and national indicators. The process of looking at performance on a quarterly basis has been in place to ensure that senior managers have an oversight of how LAC reviews are working and whether practitioners require further training in specific areas of practice. The IRO Service will be looking at how this information can be shared with senior managers more frequently in recognition of the need to ensure areas of improvement and developments are actioned without undue delay.
- 5.3 A member of the IRO service attends the Life Chances Team on a regular basis. This offers the IRO opportunities to work within a multi disciplinary team to support Looked after Children in Bracknell Forest. Furthermore the IRO Service attends regular meetings with the Looked after Childrens nurse, SEMRAC and SILSIP all of which enable opportunities for the service to contribute to improving outcomes for Looked after Children within Bracknell Forest.
- 5.4 A role of the IRO is to monitor and maintain an overview of the Care Plan, including court Care Plans, and the Pathway Plan of each Looked after Child both at the review meeting and between Reviews. The IRO service has worked in partnership with the Leaving Care Service to develop a user friendly pathway plan document and aims to collaborate with Childrens Social Care in developing Care Plans in this way. As part of their role, the IRO will hold a pre meeting with the social worker, speak to carers and parents, read the child's file and speak to the child between review meetings. This year, the IRO service has further developed and implemented pre lac review meetings with children and young people. The social worker, in turn, has particular responsibilities within the process and should update the IRO on significant events and provide an updated Care Plan and a report for the LAC Review. The requirements and timescales for reviews are clearly set out in the IRO handbook and the IRO service provides regular training for social workers on the roles and

responsibilities for Looked after Children and contributes to the induction programme for new social workers.

- 5.5 The IRO Service contributes to tracking meetings which monitor progress on both legal proceedings and pre proceedings and in relation to Looked after Children awaiting permanent placements. The permanence tracking meeting considers children requiring permanence through adoption, long term fostering and special guardianship.
- 5.6 The IRO service contributes to foster carer's reviews by completing a consultation form. This allows the IRO to comment on good practice and also note areas of concern. The IRO service also works with the Placement Officer with regard to quality assuring residential placements and will raise concerns where appropriate to ensure that all children and young people are appropriately placed in placements which meet their needs.
- 5.7 The Team Manager supervises IRO's on a monthly basis and monitors their caseload and overall performance and training needs. Each IRO has been observed by the Team Manager or Head of Service during the last year.
- 5.8 A monthly IRO business meeting enables management oversight of areas in development, progress and issues being experienced by the IRO service.

Training and Peer support

- 5.9 Members of the team have undertaken training appropriate to their needs. As a whole team they have attended legal updates training and signs of safety training in line with the borough's wider implementation of the model. Furthermore, the IRO service has contributed to the borough's policy on permanence. The Team Manager and all IRO's have completed the "Do You Know" training, which was developed by Looked after young people to help practitioners to understand what it feels like to be a looked after child.
- 5.10 Members of the IRO service have been regularly attending the South East Regional Network which meets there times per year. These meetings have been working on issues from the national IRO group.

6. CHALLENGE AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION

- 6.1 It is a requirement for IROs to have a clear framework and structure in place to be able to raise issues of concern which relate to the child's carer plan and for Children's Social Care to be able to respond using a formal process.
- 6.2 In January 2015 the Bracknell Forest dispute resolution process was reviewed after receiving feedback from Children's Social Care about operational issues and timescales for responding. We have developed a procedural guide which clarifies the types of issues and triggers for initiating the formal process and setting out how the process will be operated and recorded.
- 6.3 The process allows for a number of stages to be accessed in order to resolve an issue or concern which escalates appropriately if the issue remains unresolved to the satisfaction of the IRO., IROs received further training on this in January 2016 and an updated process is in place to consistently record and capture themes which inform learning at regular intervals in line with quarterly reporting. The introduction of the revised dispute resolution process supports more direct dialogue between the social work teams and the IROs to resolve concerns before escalating through the dispute process.

Informal challenges have included:

- Delay in care planning.
- Regulatory LAC visits not taking place within timescales.
- Drift in follow up actions in the agreed care plan.
- Lack of information available to IRO regarding care planning.
- Social Work reports not always being provided for LAC reviews.
- Level of contact and other contact issues.

Examples of Challenges made by the IRO Service

Challenge – Care planning

The social worker came to the review without a completed pathway plan and no evidence of a clear plan to support the young person move on to a semi independent placement. The IRO made a request for a multi agency professionals meeting to be arranged to agree a plan to support the young person emotionally and physically through the transition to independence.

Outcome

A meeting was held and attended by all professionals working with the young person and a clear plan was put in place which offered the young person support in her education, developing her independence skills, and accessing emotional support services.

6.3 Challenge – Delay in carrying out actions from the previous review

At the lac review meeting there was no evidence of significant actions agreed at the previous lac review being carried out. These included contacting a solicitor regarding immigration issues and a risk assessment of carers new partner. There was also a concern regarding the timeliness of lac visits.

Outcome

A solicitor was contacted and immigration issues were dealt with appropriately. Risk assessment was completed in conjunction with the fostering agency. Practice issues were raised with the allocated social worker in supervision.

6.4 Challenge – Sibling contact

The young person's care plan was to have sibling contact during each holiday. However this had not been happening on a regular basis and had not planned in advance. This meant it was difficult to arrange for all children to be free at short notice for contact.

The IRO requested that the social worker and the foster carers of all children to work out a contact rota in advance to ensure everyone is aware of dates times and venues for contact

Outcome

A contact rota was agreed with dates venues and times. A copy was given to all the children and also to the foster carers

Examples of Good Practice

6.5 The IRO Service observes many areas of good practice on a day to day basis and would like to note that the ongoing commitment and support given to children and

young people by a wide range of professionals. Some examples of good practice noted include:

Child placed in a long term placement which is a distance from Bracknell

When living in the Bracknell area this child expressed to her social worker that she felt safe and secure during contact sessions with her mother when her contact was supervised by one of the family workers (Under 11's Team)

Arrangements were made for this worker to supervise two contacts following the child's move to a new long term placement which is a considerable distance away from Bracknell.

This has enabled the child to have some consistency and continuing support during a time of significant change for her. The IRO Service views this as a good example of child focussed practice.

Preparation to move to adoptive placement

This involved two siblings (aged 7 and 11) placed in a foster placement together .The plan for the 7 year old child was adoption whilst the plan for the 11 year old was long term fostering.

The social worker in the case worked really well with the foster carer and prospective adoptive parents to plan how both children could be supported through the transitional stages taking into consideration their ages, abilities wishes and feelings.

The Chief Officer, Children Social Care, observed a Looked After Children Review for these children and noted the careful sensitive work which was planned to work with and support the children in this complex situation.

One to one work was completed with both children and when appropriate joint sessions with the siblings. The social worker used a number of different tools to work through feeling of loss and separation with both children. This work was planned in advance and the timescales for the work was dictated by the children.

Both children had a very good understanding of the plan and why decisions had been made regarding their futures. This piece of work resulted in a very positive transition for both children.

Supporting a young person to return to the Bracknell area

This piece of work involved a young person and her family who had a long history with CSC. A number of her older siblings had received services in the past and the family's relationship with children social care has not always been a positive experience.

The young person had been living away from the Bracknell area in a residential unit. Over the last year she had made a considerable amount of progress preparing for independent living and had very strong views about her future. Due to some negativity in her relationship with her social worker at the time the young person spoke to her IRO about her wishes and feelings.

The IRO was able to discuss with the social work team the views of the young person and also the views of the residential unit and it was agreed a professionals meeting would be held to discuss how the care plan could be progressed.

The multi agency approach involving the social work team, educational professionals, Family Placement Team, the residential unit and the Leaving Care

Team, provided the opportunity to create a plan to enable the young person to return to Bracknell with the support of services to enable her return to be a positive experience.

This is also a good example of all professionals listening to the child and the role of the IRO as an advocate for the child

Multi agency work – supporting an education placement

A young child with an Education health care plan was placed in a prospective adoptive placement. Due to the area of the new placement the child left his previous school provision when he moved to his adoptive placement. There were delays in identifying a long term school placement due to challenges around available provision and distance.

After a period of settling into the placement the social worker and prospective adoptive parents raised their concerns regarding the school placement and although tuition had been put in place it was not felt this was appropriate. The home tuition was putting a strain on the placement and the child was asking to go to school.

The adoptive parents, social worker and the virtual school approached a local school and requested that the child had access to the school building and be supported by the virtual school. This was agreed and whilst a long term provision was identified the child had a sense of normality of getting up and going to school and interacting with his peers.

7. ISSUES IMPACTING ON THE SERVICE FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

- 7.1 The impact of the changing view with regard to the use of Section 20 (Children Act 1989) has led Children Social Care to review all Section 20 cases. This is impacting on the amount of court work being carried out by both social work teams but in particular has led to an increase of care proceedings being filed by the 'Over 11's' social work team.
- 7.2 The IRO Service has continued to develop the service in line with the regulations set out in the IRO Handbook. This has included the introduction of the IRO attending permanency planning meetings, professional meetings, placement disruption meetings whilst attempting to continue to offer the children and young people a positive experience throughout the lac review process. The IRO Service recognises the importance of the IRO having an overview of each individual case and evidencing this on the child's CSC file. We are currently developing systems to enable our administration team to support the IRO with administration tasks to free the IRO to use our time more productively.
- 7.3 The IRO Service is mindful of its role to quality assure care planning and challenge delay in making plans for looked after children. During this review period the courts have requested statements from the allocated IRO asking for evidence and reasoning for the decisions made in two individual cases. The IRO Service welcomes dialog with the courts and are currently working to create a process where information required will be more accessible to the IRO on FWi. The reasoning for this is to be more efficient when gathering information and for the IRO 'foot print' to be more visible.
- 7.4 The IRO Service welcomes the efforts made by Children Social care regarding the retention of social work staff. A considerable amount of work and commitment has taken place to employ permanent social workers. The impact of this will be of benefit to all looked after children as having a permanent worker will offer a more consistent approach to care planning and will enable the child, family and social workers to build a good working relationship.

- 7.5 The workload of the IRO service has continued to be consistently busy and demanding particularly as a significant number of Looked After Children have been placed out of the Bracknell area, some of which are a considerable distance due to the specialist care needs of the individual child. Some have experienced a higher number of placement moves which has resulted in additional reviews within a six month review period. The successful introduction of the pre review meeting with the child will also continue to impact on the IRO's workload.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The IRO Service has had a very busy and productive year. The number of children who enter or leave the looked after system has remained stable during this review period. However the continuing work carried out within the service to develop and improve the role of the IRO has put more pressure on the service.
- 8.2 The IRO Service notes the ongoing hard work and commitment of Social Workers and other professionals in supporting young people who are looked after and the quality of the relationship with Children's Social Care in particular remains a strength.
- 8.3 There are many challenges in the coming year which will require the IRO Service to continue to focus on quality, improvement and ensuring the voice of the child remains at the centre of the process, the developments in this year have been positive and we look forward to ensuring they continue to support good practice and positive outcomes for our children and young people.

9. ACTIONS FOR 2016 / 17

The following recommendations will be implemented over the next 12 months with quarterly reviews in place to check progress against each target:-

- 9.1 Implement social media technology to enable children and young people to be offered wider accessible options to communicate with their IRO. It is anticipated that existing media technology, e.g. WhatsApp/Facebook be utilised as part of a business as usual arrangement between IROs and children and young people looked after. There is no cost implication in relation to this.
- 9.2 Improve opportunities for fathers to participate in the LAC review meetings of their children during the next review period.
- 9.3 IRO Service will be looking at how performance information can be shared with senior managers more frequently in recognition of the need to ensure areas of improvement and developments are actioned without undue delay. It is considered that a monthly exception report is produced to highlight key issues in a timely way.
- 9.4 Continued performance monitoring and quality assurance of the work of the team. This will include ongoing observations of practice by Team Manager and Head of Performance Management and Governance, audit and peer review processes. This will be reported on a quarterly basis.
- 9.5 Delivery of workshop / seminars to Social Workers and Managers to ensure the role of IRO is clearly understood and new staff to have a detailed induction along with refresher briefings and research updates.
- 9.6 Consistent attendance/representation at South East Regional Groups and pan-Berkshire IRO/Guardian meetings to increase networking and support opportunities on a quarterly basis to help build upon and share good practice for all children and young people in care.

- 9.7 Develop further peer support through opportunities for group supervision for IROs to improve child-centred reflective practice.