

**CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND LEARNING  
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL  
30 June 2010**

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**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE: ANNUAL REPORT  
Director Children, Young People and Learning**

**1 PURPOSE OF DECISION**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the annual report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service to the Children, Young People and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

**2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That the report set out in Annex 1 is received by the Children, Young People and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Panel.
- 2.2 That the Children, Young People and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Panel note that new guidance was issued in Spring 2010 which will have an impact on the way in which the IRO role will develop in the coming year.

**3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 The IRO Service performs a key role in assuring the quality of the local authority's care planning for children who are looked after. The annual report supports the continuing development and review of the local strategy for children's services.
- 3.2 Guidance issued by the DCSF [now the DFE] requires that an annual report should be provided to the Lead Member with Executive responsibility for Children's Services and for Corporate Parenting, with the aim of identifying good practice, and highlighting areas for further development / improvement.
- 3.3 The attached report was completed in October 2009, it was received and approved by the Executive Member for Children and Young People, and was received by the Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel in December 2009. Normal protocol when the report is presented to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel is that a response from the Council completed by the Chief Officer, Children's Social Care, is also presented. A copy of this response is attached as annex 2. This is the first time the report has been submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.
- 3.4 Towards the end of 2009 the DCSF issued a suite of statutory guidance for consultation setting out how local authorities should carry out their full responsibilities in relation to care planning, placement and review for looked after children. The new IRO Handbook was one of those documents. There is work underway currently to determine the impact of the new guidance, published in spring 2010.

**4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 None considered as production of such a report is recommended in DCSF Guidance.

## **5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

- 5.1 DCSF Guidance suggests that IRO Services should produce an annual report for consideration by the Executive Member for Children's Services.
- 5.2 The Guidance does not specify either structure or content but states that the purpose of the report is to inform the development of local strategies for meeting the needs of children who are looked after by the Local Authority.
- 5.3 The attached report is the fourth annual report. It sets out the work of the IRO Service over the period 1 September 2008 – 31 August 2009. The report highlights good practice and identifies areas of potential concern and the measures that have been taken to address these.
- 5.4 Legislation is supported by detailed guidance, which has been taken into account in making arrangements in Bracknell Forest.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 reinforces and strengthens the role of the IRO enabling more effective independent oversight and scrutiny of the child's case to ensure that the child is able to meaningfully participate in planning for their own care and that the care plan that the local authority prepares for them is based on a thorough assessment of the individual child's needs.

## **6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS**

### Borough Solicitor

- 6.1 The Guidance is issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 which requires local authorities in their social services functions to act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State. As such the Guidance does not have statutory force but the authority should comply with it unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons which justify a variation.

### Borough Treasurer

- 6.2.1 The Borough Treasurer is satisfied that there are no significant financial implications arising from this report.

### Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.3 The IRO Service has been the subject of a full Equalities Impact Assessment and as this report proposes no change of policy a further EIA is not required at this stage.

### Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.4 No issues arise from this report.

## **7 CONSULTATION**

### Principal Groups to be Consulted

None

Method of Consultation

Not applicable

Representations Received

Not applicable

Background Papers

Revised policy and procedure for the statutory review of  
children looked after: Bracknell Forest Borough Council

21 March 2006

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**Annex 1**



**Independent Reviewing Officer Service**

**Annual Report**

**2008/9**

**Jan Poole, Independent Reviewing Officer**  
**Sandra Davies, Head of Performance Management and Governance**

**October 2009**

# 1 Introduction

This is the fourth annual report on the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in Bracknell Forest. The IRO has a key role in assuring the quality of the case planning for those children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. Throughout the period of this report the IRO has contributed to the development of good practice in this area through highlighting good practice and identifying areas of concern and weakness. The purpose of this report is to provide a context for this work and to summarise the issues that have arisen for the lead member with responsibility for children, young people and corporate parenting.

The report covers the period from 1 September 2008 to 31 August 2009.

## 2 Context

### Legislation

The arrangements for the statutory reviews of looked after children were amended and updated by Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which introduced the new statutory role of the Independent Reviewing Officer. The requirement for such a post came into force in September 2004.

The legislation required local authorities to appoint an Independent Reviewing Officer with the remit of:

- chairing the authority's looked after children reviews;
- monitoring the authority's review of the care plan; and
- where necessary, referring cases to the Children and Families Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) to take legal action as a last resort if the failure to implement the care plan might be considered to breach the child's human rights.

In addition, there is an expectation that this service will 'quality assure' the local authority's care planning for looked after children.

Legislation is supported by detailed guidance<sup>1</sup>, which has been taken into account in making arrangements in Bracknell Forest.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 reinforces and strengthens the role of the IRO enabling more effective independent oversight and scrutiny of the child's case to ensure that the child is able to meaningfully participate in planning for their own care and that the care plan that the local authority prepares for them is based on a thorough assessment of the individual child's needs. Revised IRO Guidance is expected in draft Autumn 2009 for consultation.

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<sup>1</sup> **Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002** *DfES publication*, available at [www.dfes.gov.uk/adoption](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/adoption)

## Which children?

All looked after children, including children who are in an adoptive placement, prior to an adoption order, are covered by the legislation. 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 the local authority accommodation.

In Bracknell Forest the number of such children in August 2009 (figures for August 2008 in brackets) was:

section 31 of the Children Act 1989	35 (33)
section 20 of the Children Act 1989	59 (47) including 19 (15) short break care
Placement Order: Adoption and Children Act 2002	0 (5)
On remand	1 (0)
Total	95 (85)

## The IRO service in Bracknell Forest

Responsibility for the service rests with the Director of Children, Young People and Learning. In order to provide independence from the line management of cases and the allocation of resources (Chief Officer: Children's Social Care), this post is managed by the Head of Performance Management and Governance.

## Statutory Reviews

The purpose of the statutory review is to consider the plan for the welfare of the child; to monitor the progress of the plan; and make decisions to amend the plan as necessary in the light of changed knowledge and circumstances.

In chairing reviews, the IRO is required to ensure that:

- the child's views are understood and taken into account; and
- the persons responsible for implementing any decision taken in consequence of the review are identified.

Any failure to review individual cases should be brought to the attention of a senior person within the local authority.

The Executive Member for Children and Young People approved a revised policy and procedure for the reviews of looked after children which comply with the latest legislative requirements in March 2006<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Policy and Procedure for the Statutory Review of Looked After Children  
Bracknell Forest Borough Council 21 March 2006

## Frequency of reviews

Under the provisions of the *Review of Children's Cases Regulations (1991)*<sup>3</sup> local authorities are required to review the case of any child who is Looked After or provided with accommodation as follows:

- first review must take place within 28 days of the date upon which the child begins to be looked after or provided with accommodation;
- second review must be carried out no later than 3 months after the first review; and
- subsequent reviews shall be carried out not more than 6 months after the date of the previous review.

The date of the next review should be brought forward:

- if there is a change of placement or other substantial changes to the care plan (see below for clarification of this);
- if the IRO has specific concerns about a child and directs that the review be brought forward; and
- any request from the child or parent(s) for a review to be brought forward should be given serious consideration.

## 3 Overview of Work

### Number and timeliness of reviews

A total of 230 Looked After Children (LAC) reviews (excluding Short Break Care reviews) took place in the relevant period.

Every effort is made to carry out reviews within the statutory timescales<sup>4</sup>. In the period up to 31 August 2009, 225 (97.8%) reviews have been conducted on time. This is excellent performance. At 31 March 2009 the NI 66 figure was 91.3% and compares favourably with the national figure of 90.9%.

Local authority performance is measured against the recorded achievement in this area. Performance in this area is closely monitored and in all cases when a review is 'out-of-time', the reasons are noted. The reasons for reviews being overdue were:

- Key personnel not being available (2 reviews)
- Child had two placement moves in a short period of time (1 review)

The statistics reflect the continuing conscientiousness of social workers in informing the IRO when a child is newly accommodated and alerting the IRO in good time to anticipated difficulties with forthcoming review dates.

### Child Participation in reviews

The involvement of children in their own reviews is regarded as an essential part of the process. This has been highlighted as a priority in previous reports and has continued to be an important theme this year.

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<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 3

<sup>4</sup> NI 66 Timeliness of Reviews of LAC is included in the 198 indicators in the National Indicator set and will be reported on in quarterly performance monitoring reports.

*'A key task for the IRO will be to ensure that the review processes, and particularly review meetings, remain child and family centred'*<sup>5</sup>

The IRO has an important role in ensuring that the child:

- can make a meaningful contribution to their review;
- speaks for themselves if they are able and willing to do so; and where this is not possible that their views are conveyed by someone else on their behalf or by an appropriate medium; and
- has been given the opportunity to make a written contribution to the meeting, particularly if they have chosen not to attend or are unable to attend for some other reason.

The recorded achievement in this area of activity is also a measure of local authority performance (although no longer a national performance indicator)<sup>6</sup>. At 31 March 2009, this figure was 98.4% and represents improved performance when compared with a figure of 90% at 31 March 2008.

The reasons why children did not contribute to their reviews in this reporting period are given below:

- A young person did not attend his review in spite of arrangements having been made, and attempts by the IRO to speak to him subsequently were unsuccessful;
- A mother would not allow her children to be included in the review process in any way. This involved five reviews;
- A young person was given a custodial sentence the day before his review and the IRO was not able to make contact with him within a meaningful period of time following the review;
- A plan for the IRO to meet a child with disabilities prior to the review to assist preparation for the child to participate in the meeting was not successful;
- An older teenager refused to participate in the review meeting, complete a consultation paper or use the opportunity of someone speaking on their behalf.

Work has continued to enable children to participate in their reviews in ways acceptable to them. Reviews are rarely held in school time, and, in the few cases where this is necessary, the meeting takes place in the lunch break if possible, thus allowing the child to attend with minimal disruption to their education. Social workers in the Disabled Children's Team, together with their manager and with the Children's Services Management Team, have continued to promote the participation of disabled looked after children. The outcome has been continued improvement in this area. More children have been enabled to attend all or part of their reviews, due to the creativity of social workers, closer working together with staff at the Local Authority's Special School and continued effort on the part of key workers at the Larchwood Short Break Unit. Several reviews have taken place in the children's own homes on their return from school, providing them with a comfortable environment for these meetings. Progress is evident in the majority of out of borough establishments to ensure that the child is being supported to enjoy their right to participate in their reviews.

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<sup>5</sup> Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002

<sup>6</sup> C63, Participation in Reviews



It has been identified that expectations by the local authority in respect of child participation in LAC reviews need to be explicit in contracts in order to be able to challenge establishments where the child is not being supported to enjoy their right to participate in their reviews and this is included in any new contracts.

### **Young people chairing their own reviews**

Young people have continued to be encouraged to chair their own reviews. 17 reviews were chaired by the young person themselves. Their ages ranged from 12 to 17 and five of them chaired their meetings twice. They enjoyed the experience and their willingness to be available to help other young people who are considering chairing their reviews for the first time is an area which is available for development. Their increased confidence is noticeable each time they take on this role. Six co-chaired their reviews. Developments such as spending more time with the young person preparing for the review, encouraging other young people to chair and younger children to co-chair, are carried out as time permits, although all young people are offered the opportunity to speak to the IRO directly before their review.

### **The Child Participation Development Officer (CPDO)**

The Department employs an officer with responsibility for encouraging the participation of children and young people in a range of activities. The IRO has worked with this officer to develop this area of work with regard to statutory reviews. The CPDO seeks to:

- encourage professionals to do all in their power to enable young people to have their say in decisions which affect them;
- inform and enable young people to know their rights and to have their say in meetings which concern them; and
- enable the young person to attend and/or contribute to that meeting in some way.

Work has been undertaken to review the consultation materials for children with learning difficulties and disabilities and a new consultation booklet is in draft form.

The IRO informs the CPDO if a child has not attended their review so that she can follow up on this and encourage or help future participation. The allocated social worker will always follow this up too. Ways of making the consultation document available electronically is being considered, as is a suggestion that children and young people should be able to e-mail or send text messages to the IRO directly.

### **Reports to managers in Children's Social Care**

The IRO meets on a quarterly basis with the Head of Service for Looked After Children in order to ensure appropriate liaison between the service and children's social care teams. In order to support the development of good practice, the IRO has reported quarterly to the Children's Social Care Management Team (CSCMT) and six monthly to the meeting of Team and Unit Managers (TUMs). In addition to reporting on the number of reviews held on time and child participation in reviews, she has also reported on the following issues:

### Overarching Permanence Plans

A plan for permanence must be produced for all looked after children at their four monthly statutory reviews with milestones that can be monitored and agreed at that review. 100% were completed on time.

### Pathway Plans

A Looked After Child Pathway Plan should be started when the young person is 15½ and completed by their sixteenth birthday. Of the young people who fall into this category, 91% had a plan in place at the required time. Of the four who did not, two had passed their 16<sup>th</sup> birthdays at the time they were accommodated; one was accommodated very shortly before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday and a decision had been taken that the fourth young person was not ready to start their Pathway Plan until near the time of their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. There is good working together between the Over 11s and the After Care Teams with a member of the latter team attending reviews once a looked after child reaches the age of 15 ½. This enables them to get to know the child and vice versa and to assist with the child's smooth transition to the After Care service at the appropriate time.

### Consultation Papers

*'The IRO has an important role in ensuring that all parties to the review are able to make an effective contribution.'*<sup>7</sup>

Consultation Papers are sent to parents, carers and the young person prior to a review. A review of the consultation documents was completed in 2007 but the level of returns over the reporting period has continued to be variable. The child's consultation paper provides the IRO with a comprehensive picture of the child's feelings about the various aspects of the care and services he/she is receiving and assists the IRO in ensuring the child's voice is heard.

### Parental Involvement in Reviews

This continues to improve. In 144 reviews (63%)<sup>8</sup>, over the reporting period, parental contributions were taken into account: 53% of reviews were attended by a parent and a further 9% participated by the medium of a consultation paper, prior discussion with the Social Worker or a telephone conversation with the IRO. In a further 33 reviews parental attendance is n/a for reasons such as parents deceased, adoptive placements, UASC etc – this would increase this figure to 77%. The IRO informs the Social Worker's supervisor of reviews where no parental involvement took place, to facilitate a discussion as to the reasons for this and whether the situation can be improved for future reviews. In some cases, however, it is not appropriate for the birth parents to attend reviews e.g. children placed with their prospective adoptive parents.

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<sup>7</sup> Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance, Adoption And Children Act 2002 page 27 *DfES publication*, available at [www.dfes.gov.uk/adoption](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/adoption)

<sup>8</sup>This compares with 54% in the period up until the end of August 2008

## Youth Offending Service (YOS) involvement in Reviews

In order to improve ways in which the Youth Offending Service can contribute more effectively to reviews, the IRO has monitored their attendance or report contribution in relevant LAC cases. Feedback has been given in person by the IRO attending the YOS team meetings. Much improved involvement has been recorded as well as better communication between the YOS and Social Workers in respect of looked after children.

## Other Issues

Further monitoring includes the completion of Permanency Planning Meetings; timescales for Social Workers' reports reaching the IRO in advance of children's reviews; the completion of mid-term reviews (i.e. a paper review of the decisions and actions agreed at the previous review carried out by the Social Worker half way through the six monthly cycle, a copy of which is forwarded to the IRO).

## **Short Break Care Reviews**

Over the period, a total of 31 reviews took place for children who receive short break care at the Larchwood Short Stay Unit, The Chiltern Centre, Henley and Bridge House, Slough. These children are currently treated as accommodated under Section 20, Children Act 1989. Short Break care is defined as care that lasts for fewer than 120 days per annum, with no period of care for longer than four weeks.

Whilst Local Authority Performance is not measured in this area<sup>9</sup>, short break care reviews are given equal importance to those for children who are looked after full time, but less Quality Assurance monitoring is undertaken. All but one of the reviews took place on time.

## **Development of policies and procedures**

The IRO contributes to new policies or review of existing policies as relevant.

## **Support for the Berkshire IRO Network**

The Berkshire IRO Network has met quarterly and the meetings continue to be hosted in Bracknell Forest. It is well attended and considered to meet its aims. The network aims to raise standards for LAC across Berkshire; to promote consistency of practice and service provision across agencies; and to provide a source of mutual support. This includes:

- professional development;
- raising practice standards;
- research and development;
- group supervision; and
- the opportunity to feed issues into the SE Regional Network.

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<sup>9</sup>There is no formal indicator to measure this but performance is recorded as part of the DCSF data collection exercise regarding all reviews that take place during the year. Locally this performance is included in the quarterly Performance Monitoring Report for the Council.

The IRO also attends the South East IRO Network Meetings which provides a wider perspective of the IRO role and up to date information on Government policy, guidance and initiatives.

## **4 Focus on Practice**

A key function of the IRO is to raise issues where practice can be improved. In the vast majority of cases this is not necessary and comments are made elsewhere in this report on the quality of care planning and case management by staff within the Children's Social Care branch. Regular feedback on good practice is given to members of staff and their managers.

It is evident that there is a strong commitment to improve outcomes for children across the Department and within the Council. The issues that follow have been raised by the IRO in line with the Resolution Protocol (see page 16), during the period of this year's report, with the intention of highlighting where improvements can still be made:

### **Accommodation**

1. The IRO commented on a placement for two children approx, 55 miles from their school and the long journey travelled each day to and from school, even though she was aware that a placement was being sought nearer their school. She was particularly concerned for the youngest child who was starting their first term at secondary school.

Outcome: An appropriate placement was being sought and was soon identified for the children enabling them to move within two weeks of the beginning of the new school year.

### **Education**

1. The IRO recorded her concerns regarding an apparent unresolved issue of 1:1 support for a young person in school and the inappropriateness of the head teacher's comments at a LAC Review.

Outcome: The matter was resolved through discussion between the S.E.N. Manager and the school.

2. The IRO supported the concerns of those who attended a child's LAC review regarding an apparent delay in an assessment process for a child in secondary school and whether the school was able to meet the child's needs.

Outcome: The IRO discussed the concerns with the Principal Psychologist, who confirmed at that time and following individual work with the child that he did not consider it necessary for the Local Authority to initiate a statutory assessment of the child's educational needs at the present time.

## Care Planning Issues

### Care Planning

1. Following a review for a young person placed out of area, the IRO recorded her concerns regarding the lack of progress by the care agency on the care plan.

Outcome: The IRO was informed that Children's Social Care had had some concerns regarding the provider for some time. The carers provided a full education proposal and independence plan within a short space of time following the review. Ongoing difficulties in respect of education provision for children placed out of area and who have a Statement of Educational Need were again highlighted in this case.

2. Following the first LAC Review, the IRO commented on an inappropriate placement, in her view, of a young person with a family friend.

Outcome: The IRO was informed that Children's Social Care shared her views. The young person had been offered a foster placement in Bracknell but had refused this and their placement with a family friend was in accordance with their wishes and feelings. The young person returned to live at home successfully within a short space of time.

3. The IRO commented on the delay (22 months) in providing a disabled young person with their own chair at the short break care unit.

Outcome: The Local Authority's contribution towards the expenditure was authorised.

4. The IRO queried whether the Public Law Outline process had delayed care planning for three children and whether initiating Care Proceedings at the outset would have reduced the delay in securing a professional for the recommended assessments, thus determining clearer care plans at an earlier stage.

Outcome: The IRO was informed of the work that had been undertaken and was kept informed of the progress on the assessments and the care plans.

5. Following a LAC Review, the IRO supported the Social Worker's concerns that a young person's residential school placement, whilst meeting his educational needs, was not meeting his social care needs.

Outcome: As the placement became more difficult, the young person was removed from the school and an alternative placement assessed to meet his needs was identified.

## **Practice Issues**

### **1. Inter-country adoption**

Following the third post inter-country adoption placement review for a two year old in June 2007, the IRO requested that a policy be drawn up to provide standards and guidance in future cases.

Outcome: The policy is in draft form. There have been no inter-country adoptions in this reporting period.

### **2. Children who are placed outside of the borough**

The IRO is concerned about those children for whom no suitable placement was available within Bracknell Forest or the immediate surrounding area at the time they were accommodated, which resulted in them being placed at considerable distance from Bracknell. This has implications for their education and their contact with family. It presents them with the dilemma of having to try to invest in two areas and entails considerable time spent travelling between the two locations.

### **3. Supported Lodgings accommodation**

The IRO is also concerned about the apparent lack of Supported Lodgings placements which would meet the needs of those older young people who are not ready for independent living or do not want to move into Rainforest Walk or Holly House or for whom a place is not yet available.

4. The IRO contributes to foster carers' annual reviews and informs the Department of any concerns in relation to foster carers' standards.

## **The work involved in raising issues**

In order to raise issues, the IRO speaks to or writes to the Social Worker's supervisor, team manager or a Service Manager as appropriate with concerns and comments following a review. Their response may be verbal or in writing. A Resolution Protocol has been introduced (*Appendix 3 of Policy and Procedure for the Statutory Review of Children Looked After, May 2007*) and formal Practice Memos written by the IRO following a review are subject to this procedure. Timescales for responses and action regarding the escalation of an unresolved issue are set out in the protocol. During the period of this report, no matter has needed to be taken beyond the level of Service Manager.

## **Identifying good practice**

In accordance with the quality assurance function for the authority's service for looked after children, it is important that the IRO recognises and reports on good practice by individuals or teams and encourages the authority to continually improve its service for looked after children. The IRO carries out this function both formally and informally. The quarterly reports provide positive as well as critical feedback to managers and senior managers. Informal positive feedback to social workers takes place regularly as appropriate and in written form when the review meeting minutes are sent to the Social Worker. The IRO has commented on:

### Progress on care plans

- Positive working together between social workers, foster carers and parents in two cases which have enabled children to return home;
- Positive relationship between child/young person and their Social Worker which has helped them resolve some of their difficulties and move towards accessing their potential.
- Comments following reviews of children in their prospective adoptive homes regarding how quickly and well they had settled and started to develop attachments to their prospective adoptive parents. In one case the IRO reported on the prospective adoptive mother's comment that 'it had been a pleasure to work with Bracknell Forest and the Social Worker and that she felt that her prospective adoptive child had benefited from the positive aspects of the adoption process';
- Working together between teams e.g. transition between Over 11s and After Care Team;
- Timely completion of agreed review actions.

### Social Workers' contributions to LAC Review meetings

- Social workers' reports where they have been of a high standard;
- Conscientiousness regarding the arrangements for the meeting;
- Social workers' contributions in the meetings e.g. knowledgeable, assertive, confident in the face of challenges and tensions.

### Foster Carers

- Commitment and nurturing by foster carers which has resulted in significant emotional and developmental progress for children who have suffered distress and disruption;
- Commitment and nurturing by foster carers in a very stable placement which has enabled a young person with learning difficulties to achieve their potential and look forward to a positive move into young adulthood.

### **Positive comments made by children and young people about their Social Workers:**

- 'I've know her for years so I'm used to her and I like her very much';
- 'Always there for me';
- 'She helps me with everything';
- 'Funny and caring';
- 'She is the best';
- 'She is always helping me with my troubles and she is always happy'.
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### **Positive comments made by children and young people about their Foster Carers:**

- 'They're really nice, they treat me as their own';
- 'They're really fun';
- 'They are caring and they help me even when I am being bad';
- 'We all get on like a family';
- 'They are fabdiddilyocious'.

It is considered that social workers' commitment to LAC reviews has remained high over the reporting period and that they respond equally well to positive and critical comments from the IRO. They also demonstrate a commitment to ensuring the best possible outcomes for looked after children within the constraints of available resources and when working under pressure.

Two-way dialogue with social workers is encouraged by the IRO with attendance at their team meetings. These forums provide an opportunity to praise good practice and encourage ideas for improvement.

## **5 Key challenges for the IRO Service**

### **Independence and collaboration**

*'The independence of the Reviewing Officer is essential to enable them to effectively challenge poor practice in the review of cases'*<sup>10</sup>

In accordance with the guidance, the IRO is required to have a collaborative relationship with social work staff and management who hold the responsibility for ongoing care planning for the children in the care of the local authority. This relationship is not that of supervisor or someone who could undertake tasks in relation to the care plan or service delivery. This is now well understood by staff

### **Workload and timings of reviews**

The numbers of LAC in Bracknell Forest (excluding short break care) has increased slightly over the reporting period by 8.6% from 70 to 76 children. The number of reviews conducted in the period has increased by 4% from 221 to 230 (this can be explained by the fact that children come into care and leave care during the reporting period). In addition to the statutory review process outlined above, there are additional pressures and practical challenges caused by the need to bring some reviews forward i.e. in cases of placement breakdown, when a child has a planned move and when there is a change to the care plan<sup>11</sup>. For some children, therefore, reviews take place several times in a year.

Preparation, travelling time, chairing the meeting and writing the minutes constitute a considerable number of hours per review. A small number of reviews need to be carried out in two or three parts e.g. where circumstances make it difficult for child and parent(s) or parents to be together in a room. On a practical level, reviews in term time for school age children need to take place after the end of the school day, causing pressures, at times, on the IRO's diary.

Reviews are, therefore, constant with the added pressure of some children being placed many miles away from Bracknell e.g. Mid Wales, Yorkshire, Kent. Completing all reviews on time presents a challenge, which requires efficient time management on the part of the IRO and a commitment by social workers to the statutory time requirements. The general situation has been assisted by the Independent Chair

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<sup>10</sup> Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance, Adoption And Children Act 2002 page 23 *DfES publication*, available at [www.dfes.gov.uk/adoption](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/adoption)

<sup>11</sup> The PAF figures for children and young people who have three or more placement moves in the most recent period are nine out of 75 children (12%). (For 2006/7, the figure was 19% and for 2005/6, 13.9%)



Child Protection chairing a small percentage of LAC reviews. The IRO chairs a few Child Protection Conferences as workload permits.

### **Staff Turnover**

Whilst the level of turnover of social work staff has declined there is an on-going requirement to apprise new members of staff of Bracknell Forest procedures and expectations.

## **6 Areas for future development**

The following areas have been identified for development.

### **Child participation in LAC reviews**

Whilst there has been continuing improvement in this area, continuing efforts are required to raise the profile of the importance of enabling children to participate as fully as they are able in their reviews, in accordance with their rights. Social Workers will continue to be encouraged to start the planning process for a review well in advance of the due date to allow time for the necessary planning to aid participation.

Residential establishments caring for children with disabilities need to be reminded of the Local Authority's expectations and the children's rights in respect of participation in their reviews. Social workers and the IRO should pass on examples of good practice to any establishments not prioritising this aspect of reviews.

The IRO will continue to offer to meet with the child before their review to listen to their views and, if necessary hold a review meeting in two or three parts.

### **Engaging the harder to reach young people**

Whilst the number of harder to reach young people and those who express no interest in attending their reviews is very small, continuing thought needs to be given on how to engage them in order that their views can be represented at the meetings.

### **Children chairing their own reviews**

Young people will continue to be invited to chair their own reviews. Younger aged children will be encouraged to co-chair their reviews with the IRO, if appropriate, with a view to them increasing in confidence to chair their own reviews when older.

### **Consultation documents**

Monitoring of completion of these documents will indicate how these documents can be further improved for children, parents and carers and good examples provided by the IRO from other authorities will continue to be taken into account.

### **Improving standards**

Regular attendance at team meetings throughout the year by the IRO will assist dialogue on the review process and ways to improve standards.

Attendance at events such as the Foster Carers' Conference and Foster Carers' preparation groups by the IRO would assist in developing a greater understanding of the review process.

### Children and Young Persons Act 2008

It is anticipated that the requirements of this Act and the accompanying Guidance will require the IRO to have greater involvement in children and young people's cases, which will have implications for the workload of the IRO.

## **7 Conclusion**

Over the period of this review, the IRO service has met the requirements of the relevant guidance and regulations. There continue to be improvements in the quality of contributions to reviews from all parties, despite the evident pressures on time for some participants. The growing involvement of young people in their reviews is pleasing, but there will always be progress to be made in this area. Priorities are clear and will be addressed when possible, together with opportunities for further development.

The next review will cover the period from 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010.

**Jan Poole, Independent Reviewing Officer**  
**Sandra Davies, Head of Performance Management and Governance**

**October 2009**

**TO: CORPORATE PARENTING ADVISORY PANEL**  
**DATE: 02 December 2009**

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**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE:  
RESPONSE FROM THE COUNCIL TO THE FOURTH ANNUAL REPORT  
Director of Children, Young People & Learning**

**1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a response by the Council to the fourth annual report prepared by the Independent Reviewing Officer Service which was approved by the Executive Member for Children and Young People on 17 November 2009.

**2 RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 That the response in this report is noted by the Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel.**

**3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 The Department has received the report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service and wishes to inform and update the Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel on steps being taken to address issues contained within the report.

**4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 None considered.

**5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Overview of Work**

- 5.1 The Council welcomes the report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service and notes the many positive comments in relation to good practice, good systems and good management.
- 5.2 The Council is pleased by the continued good performance against the national indicator NI-66 in relation to the timeliness of reviews, although notes that performance is not as good as last year.
- 5.3 The Council is also pleased by the recognition of the Council's continued improved performance in relation to the participation of children in their reviews which shows year on year improvement (78% in 2006-7, 90% in 2007-8, 98% in 2008-9). This is no longer a national indicator but we continue to place a high importance on children and young people taking part and contributing to decisions about their care and the plans for them.
- 5.4 The Council values the Management Reports that the Independent Reviewing Officer Service provides and notes that this drives improved practice and improved performance, without undermining the professional ethics of our staff. In addition, the IRO meets with the Head of Service for Looked after

Children on a regular basis and this enables recognition of good practice, early identification of any areas for development and problem solving.

- 5.5 The Council also appreciates the involvement of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service in both local and regional IRO networks, which provide useful discussion to inform the development of local practice.

### **Focus on Practice**

- 5.6 In relation to the Focus on Practice section of the report, the Council recognises the benefits of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service not only in monitoring the Council's performance but in raising practice issues on individual cases which enables the Council to improve its practice.

- 5.7 The Council notes that all the individual concerns about practice raised by the Independent Reviewing Officer Service have been resolved satisfactorily, although there are some general issues raised that are commented on below.

5.8 Quality of placements, including out-of-borough placements

The provision of timely, local and appropriate placements for our looked after children and young people is a priority for the Council. This is reflected in the Department's Service Plan and in the Children & Young People's Plan. A number of initiatives have been implemented to increase the number and quality of in-house foster carer placements, including a review of the allowances scheme for carers, improved training provision for foster carers and the establishment of a foster carers association.

Use of in-house foster placements has increased during the past year while the use of independent agency foster placements has decreased. However, the use of residential children's homes or residential schools has continued, largely because of the level of complex needs of our looked after children, many of whom have special educational needs. Monitoring the quality of these placements is managed through the Head of Service for Looked After Children and the Contracts Officer.

Provision of supported lodgings for our older young people and care leavers continues to be a priority for the family placement team recruitment activity. As reported to the Panel at the May 2009 meeting, there is a range of accommodation provision available now for looked after children and care leavers and supported lodgings are part of this range.

Regulations being consulted on following the enactment of the Children and Young People Act 2008 include the requirement to place more children within the local authority area in placements commissioned to meet their specific needs. Specific regional commissioning activity is underway both to improve the provision of local independent fostering agency placements, and to secure more local residential provision for young people with complex needs.

5.9 Educational provision

The Independent Reviewing Officer Service report comments in a number of cases on the quality of educational provision. A revised Education of Looked After Children Policy and Procedures document is currently being developed in order to set out the support that is available and the roles and responsibilities of all those who work with looked after children. Improving the educational attainment of looked after children and care leavers so that they

reach their potential is a priority for the Council and the intention of the revised document is that it will support improved practice in this important area.

- 5.10 The Council welcomes the detailed comment on good practice reported and recognised by the Independent Reviewing Officer Service. The good quality of care planning is particularly pleasing, as are the comments from young people about their social workers and carers.

## **6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS**

### Borough Solicitor

- 6.1 The relevant legal provisions are contained within the main body of the report.

### Borough Treasurer

- 6.2 The Borough Treasurer is satisfied that any actions arising from this report can be managed from within the Department's overall budget.

### Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.3 The Council Response to the IRO Service Annual Report ensures that looked after children are not discriminated against in terms of access to appropriate services.

## **7 CONSULTATION**

### Principal Groups Consulted

- 7.1 Children's Social Care Management Team and the Departmental Management Team

### Method of Consultation

- 7.2 Meetings

### Representations Received

- 7.3 Comments received from Officers have been incorporated into this response report.

### Background Papers

Independent Reviewing Officer Service: Annual Report to Executive Member: 17 November 2009

### Contact for further information

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