

**TO: EXECUTIVE MEMBER CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND LEARNING**  
**DATE: 15 NOVEMBER 2011**

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**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE: ANNUAL REPORT 2010/11**  
**Chief Officer Strategy Resources and Early Intervention**

**1 PURPOSE OF DECISION**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the sixth Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service to the Executive Member for Children and Young People.

**2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That the report set out in Annex 1 is received by the Executive Member, Children and Young People.**
- 2.2 That the Executive Member notes the developments within the IRO Service in the past year, described in 3.4 and 3.5 below.**

**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 Department for Education [DFE] expects 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. 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.
- 3.3. New guidance on care planning, placement and review of children who are looked after came into force on 1 April 2011, supported by a suite of documents; the new IRO Handbook was one of those documents.
- 3.4. In addition to the new guidance there have been some changes within the IRO team structure and in personnel. The longstanding IRO resigned in January 2011. For a period of two months all LAC review meetings were chaired by IRO's provided through a Social Work Agency. This period ran smoothly and there were no difficulties in relation to the continuity of reviews. The newly appointed IRO came into post 23 March 2011 and in June 2011 a newly formed team called the Conference, Review and Quality Assurance Team was formed. This was a response to the increasing numbers of children who have become looked after, and an increase in the numbers of children subject to child protection plans, and the changes in the requirements of the IRO role.
- 3.5. The Council recognised and responded positively to this with the allocation of additional resources which have supported the creation of the new team. A new Team Manager working 21 hours a week and an additional IRO working 16 hours a week have helped to build capacity in the IRO role, and within the wider system of Conference and Reviews.

## **4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

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

## **5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

- 5.1 The attached report is the sixth annual report. It sets out the work of the IRO Service over the period 1 September 2010 – 31 August 2011. The report highlights good practice and identifies areas of potential concern and the measures that have been taken to address these.
- 5.2 It is important to note that the reports have demonstrated a consistency of approach by the IRO over a number of years, and the excellent professionalism of the IRO has been important to the successful delivery of the role. Whilst there have been some changes in personnel the system has remained robust and the transition in personnel has been smooth.
- 5.3 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.

- 5.4 The report identifies a number of areas of good practice, and highlights areas for development within the service for looked after children. A few of these to note are:
- In March 2011 of the 250 reviews carried out 100% were within timescales, this is an improvement on the previous year (95.3%)
  - The IRO notes effective communication systems in place for Children's Social Care when notifying the IRO of any potential changes or when a child is accommodated.
  - Child participation in reviews remains high with 97.1% participating in March 2011, a slight increase on the previous year [93.3%]
  - 14 young people felt able to chair their own review which is an increase on the previous year.
  - The IRO notes a significant amount of work undertaken by the Child Participation Development Officer which supports the effective participation of children and young people looked after.
  - There is a commitment to continue to improve the opportunities that young people have to contribute to their reviews.

## **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. The local authority is required to follow S7 guidance ( known as statutory guidance ) unless the council can articulate good

public law reasons for not doing so. Or if following the guidance would create an absurdity.

#### Borough Treasurer

- 6.2. 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 Care Planning regulations

21 March 2006

#### Contact for further information

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# **Independent Reviewing Officer Service**

## **Annual Report**

**2010/11**

**Carol Lamkin, Independent Reviewing Officer**  
**Sandra Davies, Head of Performance and Governance**  
**October 2011**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report provides an overview of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer [IRO] over the period of September 2010 to August 2011. It is the sixth annual report to be presented in this way.

**Section two** of the report lays out the legal framework for the role of the IRO, and identifies the numbers of children who are looked after, this number can fluctuate from month to month and the figure given in the section of the report relates to those children looked after in

August 2011. Information in this section identifies the purpose of the statutory review, and the required frequency at which reviews must take place.

**Section three** provides an overview of the work of the IRO and includes:

- The number and timeliness of reviews – this is monitored in relation to performance against statutory timescales, and performance in this area is good.
- Child participation in reviews – this is seen as a key function of the IRO role as the involvement of children in the review process is essential, performance in this area is good with 97.1% of children participating in their reviews as at 31 March 2011. Reasons for non participation are recorded, and work is ongoing to encourage participation. It is noted that a new consultation booklet for disabled children has proved successful in gaining children's views.
- Young people chairing their own reviews – is actively encouraged by the IRO, and there has been some success with this, it is noted that when young people do chair their conferences they appear more confident.
- Reporting to managers in Children's Social Care is inherent in the role to ensure effective communication, and provide opportunities to feed back on key performance, practice and development issues. A number of key areas are discussed during this reporting such as Permanence Plans, Pathway Planning, Consultation Papers, Parental Involvement in reviews and the involvement of key agencies in the review process.
- Short Break Care reviews relate to children with learning difficulties / disabilities who receive care away from home overnight. New guidance on Short breaks led to an internal review of those children who met the criteria as looked after, and a number of children at this time were felt not to meet the criteria, and were therefore no longer looked after.

**Section four** provides a focus on practice; as a key function of the IRO is to raise issues where it is felt that practice can be improved upon. The IRO notes in the report the strong commitment to improve outcomes for children and young people across the Council, there are however some occasions where the IRO will raise an issue formally through use of the Resolution Protocol. Issues raised in this way cover care planning issues, accommodation issues, and some specific practice issues. There is also a focus on good practice, which highlights comments made by children and young people about their Social Workers and their Foster Carers.

**Section five** looks at some of the key challenges in carrying out the role of IRO, these include:

- Independence and collaboration, noting the IRO needs to maintain a collaborative relationship with Social Work staff and management, whilst retaining the responsibility of challenging poor practice in the review of cases where this is necessary.
- Workload and timing of reviews, noting that over the period of this report the workload has increased. Within the IRO role many elements must be planned effectively to ensure a smooth review which includes preparation, consultation with the child, and other key people prior to a review, travel where a child / young person is placed outside the Borough, and undertaking additional reviews where circumstances warrant this, such as a placement move or change to a care plan.

- Providing induction and training to Social Workers ensuring that new workers are familiar with and understand the looked after child review process.

**Section six** highlights areas for future development which the IRO feels will benefit the further development and success of the looked after review process.

# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is the sixth 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 Team has contributed to the development of good practice in this area through highlighting examples of good practice and identifying areas of concern and areas for further development. The purpose of this report is to provide a context for this work and to summarise the issues that have arisen for the Executive Member with responsibility for children, young people and Corporate Parenting.

The report covers the period from 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011. It should be noted that this has been a period of significant change and development within the IRO Service. The longstanding IRO resigned in January 2011. For a period of two months all LAC review meetings were chaired by IRO's provided by a Social Work Agency. The newly appointed IRO came into post 23 March 2011.

This coincided with the development of the Conference, Review and Quality Assurance Team along with the introduction of new guidance in the form of the IRO Handbook.

## 2 Context

### Legislation

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 In addition, there is an expectation that this service will 'quality assure' the local authority's care planning for looked after children.
- 2.4 Legislation is supported by detailed guidance<sup>1</sup>, and has been taken into account in making arrangements in Bracknell Forest.

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<sup>1</sup> Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and Statutory guidance  
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/safeguardingandsocialcare/childrenincare/careplanning/careplanning/>

- 2.5 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.
- 2.6 The IRO Handbook became effective from 1 April 2011. This guidance replaces the 2004 guidance and should be read in conjunction with the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.
- 2.7 The intention is that the changes will enable the IRO to have an effective oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process.
- 2.8 Together, the amended 1989 Act and the IRO 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.

### Which children?

- 2.9 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 local authority accommodation.

In Bracknell Forest the number of such children in August 2011 was:

	August 2011	August 2010	August 2009
<b>Section 31 of the Children Act 1989</b>	36	33	35
<b>Section 20 of the Children Act 1989</b>	54	57 [including 7 short break care]	59 [including 19 – Short Break Care]
<b>Placement Order: Adoption and Children Act 2002</b>	3	2	0
<b>On remand</b>	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	93	92	95



## **The IRO service in Bracknell Forest**

- 2.10 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 within Children's Social Care, the IRO function sits with the Chief Officer Strategy, Resources and Early Intervention. The role is managed on a day to day basis by the Team Manager of the newly formed Conference, Review and Quality Assurance Team, who in turn reports to the Head of Performance and Governance.

The newly formed team is a response to the increasing numbers of children who have become looked after, and an increase in the numbers of children subject to child protection plans, and the changes in the requirements of the IRO role. The Council recognised and responded positively with the allocation of additional resources which have supported the creation of the new team. A new Team Manager working 21 hours a week and an additional IRO working 16 hours a week have helped to build capacity in the IRO role, and within the wider system of Conference and Reviews.

### **Statutory Reviews**

- 2.11 The purpose of the statutory review is to consider the appropriateness of the care plan and to make decisions to amend the plan if necessary. The review meeting should confirm any actions needed to be taken to implement the care plan and identify who will carry out the given tasks and within what timescales. A key role is to prevent 'drift' or delay in the care planning process.
- 2.12 In chairing the review meeting the IRO should ensure that views of the Following are considered, whether or not they attend the meeting;
- child or young person;
  - birth parents and any other adults with parental responsibility;
  - other significant adults in the child's life, such as extended family members;
  - those caring for the child, such as foster carers; and
  - relevant professionals
- 2.13 Any failure to review individual cases should be brought to the attention of a senior person within the local authority.
- 2.14 The Executive Member for Children and Young People approved a revised policy and procedure for the reviews of looked after children which complied with the previous legislative requirements in 2006<sup>2</sup>, this was updated in May 2007. This policy has been further updated to take account of the new guidance which became effective from April 1<sup>st</sup> 2011.

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

## **Frequency of reviews**

- 2.15 Under the provisions set out in the IRO Handbook (2011)<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 20 working 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.
- 2.16 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.
  - 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**

- 3.1 A total of 250 Looked After Children (LAC) reviews (excluding Short Break Care reviews) took place in the relevant period. Although this figure remains similar to the previous year [230], this is evidence of the impact of children coming in and out of the care system and the time frames required for reviews, which remains consistent.
- 3.2 At 31 March 2011 the NI 66 figure [% of LAC reviews carried out within timescales] was 100% which is an improvement on the figure at 31 March 2010 95.3% and 31 March 2009 of 91.3%. This is excellent performance.
- 3.3 Local authority performance is closely monitored nationally through the Ofsted Impact Indicators, locally through the Council Performance Framework indicators, in all cases when a review is 'out-of-time', the reasons will be noted.
- 3.4 The statistics reflect the effectiveness of the 'Placement Change' system in place for notifying the IRO when a child is newly accommodated and the efficiency of social workers in alerting the IRO in good time to anticipated difficulties with forthcoming review dates.

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<sup>3</sup> Regulation 33

## **Child Participation in reviews**

- 3.5 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.
- 3.6 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.

There have been some good examples of how children and young people have participated in their LAC reviews during the relevant period. One young person performed a song for everyone attending the review. Another came with her memory box to help her talk through events in her life and many will bring pieces of art work that reflect how they are feeling and their aspirations for the future.

- 3.7 The recorded achievement in this area of activity is also a measure of local authority performance (although no longer a national performance indicator)<sup>4</sup>. At 31 March 2011, this figure was 97.1%; at 31 March 2010, this figure was 93.3%.
- 3.8 Since April 2011 all children and young people have contributed in the review process in some form.
- 3.9 Work has continued to enable children to participate in their reviews in ways acceptable to them.
- 3.10 Participation by children with disabilities has continued to be promoted. The most appropriate venue and support to encourage their participation is carefully considered. The consultation booklet for disabled children has continued to be very successful in obtaining the children's views.

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<sup>4</sup> PAF C63, Participation in Reviews

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

- 3.11 14 reviews were chaired by the young person themselves, which is 4 more than 2010. The feedback from the young people suggested they found the experience enjoyable and they also expressed their willingness to be available to support other young people who maybe considering chairing their reviews for the first time. The young people stated that the experience of chairing their own reviews helped them to feel more confident in a meeting environment. Their increased confidence is noticeable each time they take on this role. 4 young people co-chaired their reviews, which is 9 less than in 2010. It is anticipated that this number will fluctuate from year to year and will depend on the age, ability and confidence of the children to undertake this role. It should also be noted that due to staff changes the children are currently meeting their allocated IRO for the first time and therefore have yet to build a trusting working relationship. This may have had some impact on the lower figure.
- 3.12 In line with the new IRO Handbook Regulations the IRO offers all children the opportunity to discuss the arrangements for their LAC review 20 days before the meeting. The IRO will arrange a time to meet with children and young people in an environment they feel comfortable in or have a discussion with them by telephone. This offers children and young people a choice as to how much they wish to be involved in the preparation of their review. It is also an opportunity for the IRO to encourage more young people to chair and younger children to co chair their reviews. If a child or young person does not wish to meet with the IRO 20 days before the review the option of speaking to the IRO before the meeting continues to be an open to them on the day of the meeting.

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

- 3.13 The Department employs an officer with responsibility for encouraging the participation of children and young people in a range of activities. The IRO Team continue to work 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
  - ensure there are appropriate processes in place to enable a young person to participate in their reviews
  - promote advocacy to young people. A new advocacy leaflet has been produced.
- 3.14 If a child has not attended their review this will be followed up by the allocated social worker. The CPDO will be informed if there are any specific barriers to participation so these can be addressed.
- 3.15 The consultation documents have recently been reviewed. The CPDO spent a great deal of time seeking the views of staff, carers, young people and the IRO Team. The new documents are currently being prepared for printing and

it is expected they will be available for use by November 2011. The CPDO has continued to explore options of making the consultation document available to young people electronically. This has provided some challenges as there is a need to consider e-safety issues. Work continues to look at this option.

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

- 3.16 A member of the IRO Team meets with the Head of Service for Looked After Children every month 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 Team 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, they have also reported on the following issues:

#### Permanence Plans

- 3.17. Plan for permanence must be produced and agreed for all looked after children at their four monthly statutory reviews with milestones that can be monitored and agreed at that review. 78% were completed on time. This figure is lower than the previous year and when this issue was explored by the IRO it became apparent that there is some clarity required in this area as the policy states that; 'the social worker should provide an outline permanency plan at the 2<sup>nd</sup> review' but that 'a Permanency Planning meeting should be held as soon after the second review as possible'. It is important for social workers to come to the four monthly review prepared to discuss the range of permanency options for the child so that the Permanency Plan can be agreed. Refresher training for social workers would be beneficial. Action is being taken to ensure this is addressed and the process clearly understood.

#### Pathway Plans

- 3.18 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, 85% had a plan in place at the required time. The department has recognised the need to develop the pathway planning process to ensure the plan is in place by the young person's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. The IRO has been actively involved in the development of a new pathway plan template. This will be introduced early October 2011.
- 3.19 In instances where young people become looked after post 16, a Pathway Plan is completed as soon as possible. Some young people may be reluctant to engage with their Social Worker to develop a plan, and work must be taken at the young person's own pace.
- 3.20 There is good joint working 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 in most cases. The teams have also introduced a system where they meet regularly to discuss individual cases and arrange joint visits to young people making the transition to adulthood.
- 3.21 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.

In line with the regulations set out in the IRO Handbook, CSC and the IRO Team have been working together to set up a system where the allocated IRO will review the Pathway Plan for 'eligible' young people through the LAC review process. This is now at a stage where it is ready to be introduced

### Consultation Papers

- 3.22 *'The IRO has an important role in ensuring that all parties to the review are able to make an effective contribution.'*<sup>5</sup>
- 3.23 Consultation Papers are sent to parents, carers and the young person prior to a review. The child's consultation paper provides the IRO with a comprehensive picture of the child's feelings about the various aspects of their care and services he/she is receiving and assists the IRO in ensuring the child's voice is heard.

It is the responsibility of the Social worker to carry out the task of ensuring consultation documents are sent to the appropriate people. The IRO Team recognises the work pressures within the social work teams and to assist them are planning to take on the responsibility of sending out consultation documents. These documents will be sent 10 working days prior to the date of the review meeting.

### Parental Involvement in Reviews

- 3.24 In 250 reviews 66%<sup>6</sup> over the reporting period, parental contributions were taken into account:
- 3.25 44% of reviews were attended by a parent and a further 21% participated by the medium of a consultation paper, prior discussion with the Social Worker or a telephone conversation with the IRO.
- 3.26 In a further 10% of reviews parental attendance is N/A for reasons such as parents being deceased, adoptive placements, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker [UASC] etc. – this would increase this figure to 77%. In some cases, however, it is not appropriate for the birth parents to attend reviews.

### Youth Offending Service (YOS) involvement in Reviews

- 3.27 In order to improve ways in which the Youth Offending Service can contribute more effectively to reviews, the IRO Team has continued to monitor their attendance or report contribution in relevant LAC cases. The IRO Team is satisfied that communication is good between the YOS and Social Workers in respect of looked after children.

### Other Issues

- 3.28 Further monitoring includes the completion of Permanency Planning Meetings; timescales for Social Workers' reports reaching the allocated IRO in advance of children's reviews; the completion of mid-term reviews (i.e. a

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<sup>5</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>6</sup>This compares with 59% in the period up until the end of August 2010

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**

- 3.29 Following the introduction of the Short Break Statutory Guidance<sup>7</sup> on how to promote the welfare of disabled children using short breaks, an internal review of the children/young people who were in receipt of short breaks under Section 20(4) of the Children Act 1989 took place in May 2010. The view was reached that 5 of these children/young people met the criteria for accommodation under section 20 from June 1<sup>st</sup> 2010. Those who do not come into this category will continue to be provided with accommodation under Section 17(6) of the Children Act 1989 and be reviewed as Children in Need by the Disabled Children's Team Manager and Assistant Team Manager. Parents were included in the consultation process.
- 3.30 Over the period, a total of 10 reviews took place for children who receive short break care at the Larchwood Short Stay Unit, The Chiltern Centre, Bridge House, Slough and with Bracknell Forest Foster Carers.
- 3.31 Short Break care is defined as care that lasts for more than 24 hours, fewer than 75 days per annum, does not include a single episode of 17 days or more and is provided in one setting.
- 3.32 Whilst Local Authority Performance is not measured in this area<sup>8</sup>, short break care reviews are given equal importance to those for children who are classed as fully looked.

### **Development of policies and procedures**

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

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

- 3.34 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:

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<sup>7</sup> Short Breaks Statutory Guidance 2010  
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/safeguardingandsocialcare/childrenincare/careplanning/careplanning/>

<sup>8</sup> Locally this performance is included in the quarterly Performance Monitoring Report for CSCMT.

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

3.35 The IRO's 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. Although the support function for these meetings has ended with the abolition of GOSE, it is intended that the IRO's will continue to meet and share information and good practice. The intention is for South East IRO Network Meetings to take place 3 monthly.

## **4 Focus on Practice**

- 4.1 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 (CSC) branch. Regular feedback on good practice is given to members of staff and their managers.
- 4.2 It is evident that there is a strong commitment to improve outcomes for children across the Department and within the Council. However should the IRO identify any concerns in relation to the child's care plan the first stage would be to have a discussion with the relevant professionals and the IRO complete a practice memo to formally raise any issues or concerns.
- 4.3 If the issues or concerns have not been addressed in a satisfactory manner they will follow the dispute resolution process as laid out in the LAC Policy and Procedure for Statutory Review for Looked After Children. Bracknell Forest January 2011. Timescales for responses are clearly set out in the Protocol.

### **Examples of Challenges**

#### Contact with family.

- 4.4 In discussions during LAC review meetings the IRO was made aware by two families their dissatisfaction regarding their contact with their children. In both situations the contact was to be supervised by CSC. The families informed the IRO that contact had been cancelled at very short notice as CSC were unable to provide a suitably qualified worker to carry out the task. This was obviously distressing for the children and family members involved and unacceptable.

The IRO raised this issue with the Team Manager and Service Manager. CSC were aware of the issues and had started the process of recruiting suitably qualified staff to ensure contact with family takes place at the agreed times.

The families have since informed the IRO that they are happy with the



arrangements that have been put in place. They have also stated that they like having the consistency of having a named worker supervise the their contact.

#### Resource Issue

- 4.5 The IRO has raised issues regarding the appropriate use of resources after a young person raised a number of concerns regarding the tutor employed to support him in improving his English. The young person stated that it was very difficult to learn from someone who is unable to converse with him in his own language and did not understand his cultural background.

The IRO questioned why a tutor from the young person's own cultural background could not be identified and suggested using an alternative agency to ensure that the experience would be worthwhile for the young person.

The LACES team is now investigating options to ensure young people are matched with appropriate tutors to ensure they have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

#### Corporate Parenting Responsibility

- 4.6 A young person who is very able academically but also very vulnerable emotionally discussed aspirations to go to university and the need to visit some universities prior to completing the application form in the LAC review.

The IRO asked what support would be available to the young person during this process. The IRO was not happy with the initial response that help with transport would be provided. The IRO questioned this and sent a practice memo asking what additional support would be offered and suggested that the young person should be accompanied on visits to universities by either the carer, social worker or ACT worker.

The situation for this young person has changed as she is now living independently with on going support from her key worker. The young person is being supported by a number of professionals regarding career choices and will be supported by her key worker to visit some universities before making final choices.

#### Care Planning

- 4.7 The IRO challenged a placement move for a young person from a foster placement to a semi independent establishment. The IRO acknowledged the role the young person took in pursuing the change of placement but raised concerns regarding the suitability of the placement and the support available to the young person. She also raised the point that the IRO had not been informed of the placement move.

The IRO requested reassurance that the support issues identified in the LAC review meeting would be addressed and a more intensive support package put into place.

- 4.8 The IRO's have commented on good practice and good progress in care

planning in several cases where they have observed positive development in children and young people's self esteem and confidence.

- 4.9 The IRO's have also relayed positive comments from residential providers on commitment by CSC practitioners and positive child focused care planning.
- 4.10 The IROs are pleased that there has been an increase over the past year in children being placed with families in Bracknell Forest. They remain concerned, however, that there are still insufficient foster placements locally resulting in children being placed some distance from their home area. Additionally, as matching is a vital component for placement stability, there is a need for a choice of placements in order to ensure the best possible match between child and foster family. Whilst the IRO's are aware that there is a national shortage of foster placements and that the family placement team actively attempt to recruit new foster carers, reality for some children is not only a move out of their family home to live with a new family, but also to a home some distance away, which involves them travelling considerable distances to school and back to Bracknell Forest for contact with relatives.
- 4.11 The IRO informs the Department of any concerns in relation to foster carers' standards.

#### **Identifying good practice**

- 4.12 In accordance with the quality assurance function for the authority's service for looked after children, it is important that the IRO Team 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 Team 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.

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

- 'I like my social worker, she is funny and make me laugh'
- 'She's great, she listens to me and understands me'
- 'She is nice, she helps me with my worries'
- 'She is very nice and she listens to me';
- 'She is ok, she tries to help me sort things out'

#### **Positive comments made by children and young people in their consultation booklets about their Foster Carers:**

- 'They care for me and love me'
- 'Funny and help me with problems and treat me like family';
- 'I think this is a good place for me. I am happy';
- 'They treat me as one of the family, I am happy living here'
- ' This is my home, I love it here because they understand me'

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

### **Positive Efforts to meet cultural needs**

- 4.15 The IRO Team recognises the importance of matching and meeting the cultural needs of the child and our aspiration would be to be able to meet all needs. However the reality is, despite best efforts this is not always possible locally. This leads to the issue of weighing up all the child's needs and identifying positive options.

In a LAC review meeting the IRO commented on the thought and consideration taken in the case of an African child being placed with White foster carers.

CSC placed the child with white foster carers locally to enable the child and family to continue to have daily contact. It was also felt important to place the child locally to enable him to continue to attend his primary school and remain connected to his local church.

CSC also recognised the child's cultural needs and employed a worker to spend time on a daily basis with the child, communicating with the child in his birth language and dedicating time to support the child with his religious needs.

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

### **Independence and collaboration**

- 5.1 *'The independence of the Reviewing Officer is essential to enable them to effectively challenge poor practice in the review of cases'*<sup>9</sup>
- 5.2 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 well understood by staff.

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<sup>9</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)

## **Workload and timings of reviews**

- 5.3 The numbers of LAC in Bracknell Forest (excluding short break care) has increased over the reporting period from 85 to 92. 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 e.g. in cases of placement breakdown, and when there is a change to the care plan<sup>10</sup>. For some children, therefore, reviews take place several times in a year.
- 5.4 Preparation, including meeting with the social worker 15 days before the review and offering children and young people an appointment 20 days before the review date has put a significant amount of pressure on the IRO's time. 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.
- 5.5 Reviews are, therefore, constant with the added pressure of some children being placed outside of Bracknell e.g. Gloucestershire, Lancashire, Kent. Completing all reviews on time presents a challenge, which requires efficient time management on the part of the IRO Team and a commitment by social workers to the statutory time requirements.

## **Induction and Training**

- 5.6 The IRO Team seeks to play a part in the induction of all new Social Workers within CSC, and appraise them of the procedures and expectations of the review process. The IRO Team continues to work with colleagues in Children's Social Care on ensuring the review requirements are implemented effectively across the teams. A new Service Agreement is in development which will clarify the roles and responsibilities of all those practitioners involved in the review process.

## **6 Areas for future development**

The following areas have been identified for development.

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

- 6.1 Whilst there has been continuing improvement in this area, continuing efforts are required to maintain the high 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. The introduction of the pre review meeting 15 days before the planned review will support the Social Worker in this area.

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<sup>10</sup> NI 62 figures for children and young people who have three or more placement moves as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011 was 8%.

- 6.2 In line with the IRO Handbook the allocated IRO will continue to offer to meet with the child 20 days before their review to listen to their views and, if necessary, hold a review meeting in two or three parts.
- 6.3 The IRO Service will work with the Child Participation Development Officer to seek ways to feed back to children and young people the contents of this report.

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

- 6.4 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**

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

#### **Consultation documents**

- 6.6 Monitoring of completion of these documents will continue and the IRO's will be seeking feedback from children, parents and carers on the appropriateness of the new consultation document.

#### **Improving standards**

- 6.7 Regular attendance at team meetings throughout the year by a member of the IRO Team will assist dialogue on the review process and ways to improve standards.
- 6.8 Attendance at events such as the Foster Carers' Conference and Foster Carers' preparation groups by a representative from the IRO Team would assist in developing a greater understanding of the review process.
- 6.9 The IRO Handbook states each local authority is required to have a system in place to ensure that IRO's have access to independent advice (p 6.13 & 6.14) Bracknell Forest IRO Team have met with the Joint Legal Team to discuss how this can be achieved. We are in the stages of producing a protocol and it is envisaged the completed protocol; will be adopted across Berkshire.
- 6.10 Further work with the Joint Legal Team is taking place regarding the IRO's involvement in care proceedings, and liaison with CAFCASS. The IRO handbook highlights the importance of IRO's working closely with the Children's Guardian during care proceedings. The IRO Team will continue to work closely with the Joint Legal Team to develop a protocol to enable these objectives to be achieved.
- 6.11 In seeking to achieve an effective IRO service there will be further development of Quality Assurance mechanisms to enable clear evidence of

how the IROs are performing their functions, particularly in relation to monitoring the effectiveness of care planning and whether this is contributing to better outcomes for children in care. The IRO team would also like to develop effective systems for evidencing and tracking the challenges which have been made in relation to individual cases so that this information can help to improve practice in the future.

## **7 Conclusion**

Over the period of this review, the IRO service has met new challenges in the implementation of the new regulations set out in the IRO Handbook. The team has been strengthened with additional resources to help to meet these new challenges. 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 involvement of young people in their reviews is very good, 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 report will cover the period from 1 September 2011 to 31 August 2012.

**Carol Lamkin, Independent Reviewing Officer**