

**TO: EXECUTIVE MEMBER CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND LEARNING**  
**11 December 2012**

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**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE: ANNUAL REPORT 2011/12**  
**Director Children, Young People and Learning**

**1 PURPOSE OF DECISION**

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

**2 RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 **That the report set out in Annex 1 is received by the Executive Member, Children and Young People.**

**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.**

**4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

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

**5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

- 5.1 The attached report is an Interim 7 month report. It sets out the work of the IRO Service over the period 1 September 2011 – 31 March 2012. The report highlights good practice and identifies areas of potential concern and the measures that have been taken to address these. This is an interim report in order to bring the IRO Annual Report in line with annual reporting timescales.
- 5.2 It is important to note that the reports have demonstrated a consistency of approach by the IRO service over a number of years, and the excellent professionalism of the IRO service has been important to the successful delivery of the role.

- 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 2012 of the 170 reviews carried out 100% were within timescales. This is the second year 100% has been achieved.
- 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 has risen to 100%; an increase from 97.1% participating in March 2011.
- 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 range of methods and opportunities that young people have to contribute to their reviews.
- Placement stability has increased from 60% to 76.2% which the IRO team note is very positive for LAC in Bracknell.
- LAC are well supported by the Looked After Children's Education Service (LACES) and Personal Education Plans are in place for all school age children.
- The majority of health assessments are being carried out within timescales and LAC's health needs are being monitored.
- There has been a 15% increase in the total number of LAC and also in the number of LAC being subject to Court Orders and who are being placed for permanence. Permanency Planning meetings are important mechanisms for setting out the permanency options for LAC and they have been happening consistently during this period.
- Some areas for improvement have been noted at the end of the report, including a goal to increase the participation of birth parents.
- A key role for the IRO service is to provide challenge about the quality and timeliness of care arrangements for LAC. The report notes examples of this and indicates that issues raised have been resolved at an early stage.

## **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. 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 (revised January 2011)  
The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations 2010  
Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review

#### Contact for further information

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**Independent Reviewing Officer Service**

**Interim Report**

**September 2011 – March 2012.**

**Carol Lamkin and Rachel Dawson Independent Reviewing Officers**  
**Sandra Davies, Head of Performance Management and Governance**  
**October 2012**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This interim report provides an overview of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service [IRO] over the period of September 2011 to March 2012.

**Section two** of the report lays out the legal framework for the role of the IRO, and identifies the number 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 March 2012. 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.
- Young people chairing their own reviews. This is actively encouraged by the IRO service and it has been disappointing that during this review period the young people did not choose to take part in this. Future work with colleagues in Children Social Care and the Children's Participation Officer is planned to make every effort to support young people to gain the confidence to take on this role.
- 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 did not meet the criteria, and therefore no longer looked after.

**Section four** provides a focus on practice. It is a key function of the IRO to raise issues where 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. The report highlights good practice including comments made by children and young people about their Social Workers and their Foster Carers. When issues do arise a clear process is in place for the IRO to formally raise and escalate issues as required.

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

- Independence and collaboration, noting that 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 Service believes will benefit the further development and success of the looked after review process.

**Independent Reviewing Officer Service  
Interim Report September 2011 – March 2012.**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 This is an interim report on the work of the independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service in Bracknell Forest. The IRO plays 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 Service has highlighted examples of good practice and identified areas of concern and areas for further development. The purpose of this report is to provide a context for this work and to summarize the issues that have arisen and the way in which issues have been resolved.

This report covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2011 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012. The reason for producing an Interim report is to enable future annual reports to run in line with annual reporting schedules and national data collection timeframes. Therefore the next report will cover the period from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013.

**2 CONTEXT AND 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.

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

Assuring the quality of the case planning for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority.

Throughout the period of this report the IRO Service has highlighted examples of good practice and identified areas of concern and areas for further development. The purpose of this report is to provide a context for this work and to summarize the issues that have arisen and the way in which issues have been resolved.

**Context**

- 2.2 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.

- 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 care planning for looked after children

Legislation is supported by detailed guidance which has been taken into account in managing the IRO arrangements in Bracknell Forest.

- 2.3 The Children and Young Persons Act 2008, reinforces and strengthens the role of the IRO enabling more effective independent oversight of the child's case and the local authority care plan and whether there has been a thorough assessment of the individual child's needs.
- 2.4 The IRO Handbook became effective from 1<sup>st</sup> 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.

The intention is that the changes will enable the IRO to effectively monitor the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process.

Together, the amended 1989 Act and the IRO handbook specify:

- It is 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; and
- the actions the IRO must take if the local authority is failing to comply with regulations, or in breach of its duties to the child in any material way, including making a referral to CAFCASS.

### **Which Children?**

- 2.5 All looked after children including children who are in an adoptive placement, prior to an Adoption Order are covered by these regulations. This applies to all children who are subject of a care order made by the Court (under section 31, The Children Act 1989), or who are voluntarily accommodated for a period of more than 24 hours (Section 20, 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 on remand by the court to local authority accommodation.



The table below identifies the number of Looked After Children and Young People in Bracknell Forest and their legal status.

	<b>March 2012</b>	<b>March 2011</b>
<b>Section 31 of the Children Act 1989</b>	47	34
<b>Section 20 of the Children Act 1989</b>	44 + 1(short break)	48
<b>Placement Order: Adoption and Children Act 2002</b>	8	5
<b>On remand</b>	1	0
<b>Total</b>	100	87

- 2.6 The table above shows that there has been an increase in the number of children who are looked after by the local authority, with 87 in March 2011 and 100 in March 2012. A significant increase in the number of Care Orders under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989 is also noted as it has risen from 34 in 2011 to 47 in 2012. There has been an increase in the number of children placed for adoption which is a positive increase.

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

- 2.7 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 IRO Service is located the Conference, Review and Quality Assurance Team, which includes the Independent Chair Child Protection role, Policy and Research, Quality Assurance and Child Participation. This enables the team as a whole to remain independent of service delivery and to maintain a focus on quality and improvement.

#### **Statutory Reviews**

- 2.8 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 to implement the care plan and identify who will carry out the tasks and within what timescales. A key function is to prevent 'drift' or delay in the care planning process.
- 2.9 In chairing the review meeting the IRO should ensure that the views of the following people 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

If for some reason attendance at the meeting is not possible the IRO will seek views using a range of methods, including additional one to one meetings, phone call, consultation documents.

### **Frequency of reviews**

2.10 Under the provisions set out in the IRO Handbook (2011)<sup>1</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.

2.11 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 170 Looked After Children (LAC) reviews (excluding Short Break Care reviews) took place in the period covered in this report.

3.2 Every effort is made to ensure reviews are carried out within the statutory timescales. In the period between 1<sup>st</sup> September 2011 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 170 (100%) reviews have been conducted on time. This is excellent performance.

3.3 Local authority performance is closely monitored and 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 conscientiousness of social workers in alerting the IRO in good time to anticipated difficulties with forthcoming review dates.

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<sup>1</sup> Regulation 33

## **Child Participation in reviews**

- 3.5 The involvement of children in their own reviews is an essential part of the process. This has been highlighted as a priority in previous reports and continues to be an important theme during this review period. 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.
- 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.
- 3.7 The contribution of the child in the review process is strong. At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 this figure was 100%, which is an improvement on the figure in March 2011 of (97.1%)
- 3.8 Work has continued to take place to enable children to participate in their reviews in ways acceptable to them. There are a number of examples of how children and young people have participated in their LAC reviews during this period.
- One child came to his review meeting with his 'feelings' box and choose to share this with the IRO.
  - Others will bring art work or photograph albums to show the IRO special events that have taken place in their lives.
- 3.9. The IRO team has been working with children and young people to take ownership of their review meetings and have encouraged them to make requests regarding the running of the meeting. A number of children and young people have requested refreshments and some have made delicious cakes for everyone to enjoy at the meeting.
- 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 document created by Larchwood has continued to be successful and there has been some creative personal DVD's presented at the review meeting.

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

- 3.11 In line with the IRO Handbook Regulations the IRO offers all children the opportunity to discuss the arrangements for their LAC review 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 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 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 before the review date the option of speaking to the IRO before the meeting continues to be open to them on the day of the meeting.
- 3.12 In this reporting period despite the opportunity none of the young people chose to chair or co chair their LAC review. The IRO team recognises that for some children and young people it is not appropriate from them to actively chair their meeting, for example children under twelve, children with severe disabilities and for others it can be due to them having a difficult time either with family members or their carers.
- 3.13 The IRO team is actively working towards developing opportunities for young people to chair meetings and continues to work closely with the Social Worker and Child Participation Development Officer.

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

- 3.14 The Department employs an officer with responsibility for encouraging the participation of children and young people in a range of activities. A positive development has been that the CPDO now sits within the same team as the IRO service, creating increased opportunities to work together. The Child Participation Development Officer 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;
  - ensure there are appropriate processes in place to enable a young person to participate in their reviews; and
  - promote advocacy to young people. The IRO team is currently working along side the CPDO to ensure children and young people who are looked after in Bracknell Forest understand the role of an advocate and have access to an independent advocacy service.
- 3.15 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.
- 3.16 The consultation documents have been reviewed. The CPDO spent a great deal of time seeking the views of staff, carers, young people and the IRO

Service. 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.

### **Liaison with Children's Social Care**

- 3.17 It is important to have effective liaison to ensure good communication and information exchange with colleagues and managers in Children's Social Care. A member of the IRO Service meets with the Head of Service for Looked After Children every month, and IRO's will meet regularly with social workers to discuss issues regarding individual children. A regular report on IRO activity and key issues is prepared and discussed quarterly with the Children's Social Care Management Team (CSCMT). This ensures good management oversight and ongoing awareness of the effectiveness of the IRO service.

### **Overarching Permanence Plans**

- 3.18 Care planning regulations state that a plan for permanence must be produced and agreed for all looked after children at their four month statutory review with milestones that can be monitored and agreed at that review. It is therefore important for social workers to come to the four month review prepared to discuss the range of permanency options for the child so that the Permanency Plan can be agreed. During this review period there were 35 reviews where this was applicable. In all cases (100 %) an overarching plan was presented. This is excellent performance.

### **Pathway Plans**

- 3.19 A Looked After Child Pathway Plan should be started when the young person is aged 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. This is a 6% increase from the previous year. The department has recognized 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.
- 3.20 In instances where young people become looked after post 16, a Pathway Plan is completed as soon as possible.
- 3.21 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 . 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.
- 3.22 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 continue to work together to support a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood for the young person.

### **Health Professional Involvement in LAC reviews**

- 3.23 The health of LAC children is of paramount importance and therefore when applicable health professionals, health visitors, school nurses, and CAMHS are invited to the individual child's LAC review.
- 3.24 All LAC children have a health assessment, which should be completed within 20 days of a child becoming looked after. If aged under 5 the child will have a 6 monthly health assessment, if 5 or over the child will then have an annual health assessment whilst they remain a looked after child. This will be monitored by the IRO at each review.
- 3.25 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 100 children were looked after. Of this group, 88 children (92.6%) had completed LAC health assessments. 4 children (4.2%) were overdue and 3 (3.2%) young people had refused to attend their LAC health assessments. A further 5 children had only just come into care on 31.03.12 and had not yet had their LAC health assessment.
- 3.26 In light of the recent OFSTED recommendations the IRO service is developing systems for communication with health colleagues to ensure any delay in a health assessment being completed is picked up quickly and rectified at the review.

### **Looked After Children Education Services (LACES) Involvement in LAC Reviews**

- 3.27 LACES works in partnership with social workers and schools to support children to achieve to the best of their ability. Every child looked after has a Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting within 20 school days after becoming accommodated by the local authority. The PEP is then reviewed on a six monthly basis and educational progress is monitored at each review.
- 3.28 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, 62 school aged children had a PEP in place. During this review period 18 children were receiving extra tuition and 3 children were being supported in the classroom by LACES funding Learning Support Assistants (LSA)
- 3.29 When appropriate a member of the LACES team will attend LAC reviews to discuss positive ways to support the child to manage within the mainstream education environment.

### **Youth Offending Service (YOS) Involvement in LAC Reviews**

- 3.30 In order to improve ways in which the Youth Offending Service can contribute more effectively to reviews, the IRO Service 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.

### **Parental Involvement in LAC Reviews**

- 3.31 Parental contributions were noted and taken into account at 170 reviews (62%)<sup>2</sup> over the reporting period.
- 3.2 46% of reviews were attended by a parent and a further 16% participated by the medium of a consultation paper, prior discussion with the Social Worker or a telephone conversation with the IRO.
- 3.33 In a further 3% of reviews parental attendance is not applicable for reasons such as parents being deceased and children being placed in adoptive placements.

### **Other Issues**

- 3.34 In addition to the formal reviews for children looked after further monitoring includes the mid way report which is completed by the social worker and supervising manager mid way through the reviewing period. This is a useful tool to enable the IRO to be up dated on delay and progress of fulfilling the child's individual care plan.
- 3.35 From February this year the IRO Service monitors the timeliness of reports being completed and whether they are shared with the family before the meeting and if a copy is available to everyone at the review meeting. This has been in response to a recommendation made in the Safeguarding and Looked after Children Inspection which took place in November 2011.
- 3.36 Data from 1<sup>st</sup> February to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 shows 42 out of 54 (77.8%) of review reports were completed and sent to the IRO within the correct timescales. 26 out of 54 (54%) had been shared with the family and 33 out of 54 (61.1%) where copies were brought to the review meeting. The IRO team will continue to monitor this performance.
- 3.37 During this review period the Life Chances Team has come into operation. This development is helpful in co-coordinating services for children.

### **Short Break Care Reviews**

- 3.38 As a consequence of the changes to the Short Break Statutory Guidance in May 2010 there are now fewer children who meet the criteria for Short Break Care.

### **Involvement with the Berkshire IRO Network**

- 3.39 The Berkshire IRO Network has met quarterly and the meetings continue to be hosted in Bracknell Forest. 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>2</sup>This compares with 59% in the period up until the end of August 2010

- professional development;
  - raising practice standards;
  - research and development;
  - group supervision; and
  - the opportunity to feed issues into the SE Regional Network.
- 3.40 The IRO's also attend 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. Whilst the national support via GOSE has been discontinued there is a commitment to maintain this network.

#### **4 FOCUS ON PRACTICE**

- 4.1 A key function of the IRO is to raise issues where it is felt practice can be improved or developed. The strong communication between the IRO Service and colleagues in Children's Social Care mean that a high proportion of issues are addressed effectively through discussion, and regular feedback on good practice is given to members of staff and their managers.
- 4.2. There is a dispute resolution protocol in place which provides the framework for the IRO Service to raise any issues or concerns, and a strong commitment to ensure that any concerns are dealt with at the earliest possible opportunity. In this reporting period it has not been necessary for any formal practice memos to be submitted.
- 4.3. The IRO Service has recently developed a feedback form which is circulated to social workers and Team Managers as appropriate following a review.

#### **Examples of Issues Challenges Raised**

##### **4.4 Care Planning**

###### **Issue**

A child with a disability has been receiving respite care in a residential unit for a number of years. In line with the care plan the level of respite care was increased to 3 nights of care per week. At this point the child's care status changed to being Looked After under Section 20, The Children Act 1989. (A child having over 75 nights a year or more than 17 nights consecutively is deemed to be fully looked after).

At the six monthly LAC review it was noted that although the child had become fully looked after by the local authority, some of the LAC procedures had not been followed, and the child had not had a PEP or a LAC health assessment. The social worker holding the case considered this child should not have these due to spending part of the week with parents. The IRO recommended that the child should have all the support and services as set out in The Children Act 1989.



### **Outcome**

After some discussion and emails between the Manager and IRO it was agreed the child did meet the criteria to be Looked After under section 20, The Children Act 1989 and that the child should receive the same services and support as all LAC children.

#### **4.5 Issue**

A young person had been placed with an Independent Fostering Agency following becoming accommodated. The permanency plan presented at the second review was for the young person to remain in long term foster care and a long term placement was being sought. At the following subsequent LAC review no long term placement had been identified. The young person had become very settled in the Independent Fostering Agency placement, had started year 10 at a new school and had made a number of friends. The young person was asking to stay in the current placement.

The IRO questioned the plan and asked whether there were any potential in house carers available to meet the young person's needs or whether the child could stay in the current placement, The IRO requested clarification about the plan.

### **Outcome**

Discussions between social worker, manager and head of service took place and it was agreed the child should remain in the current placement to complete their education. This shows the commitment of Children Social Care to meet the needs of an individual child and evidences that the young person's wishes were taken into consideration.

### **Practice Issues**

#### **4.6 Issue**

The issue in this case was regarding family contact. It involved two young children and their contact with their mother. Concern was raised at the review meeting that contact had been cancelled twice the previous week due to lack of professionals available to supervise the contact. A discussion took place in the review meeting regarding the impact this had on the children and the difficulties the nursery staff faced in managing the situation.

### **Outcome**

The situation was discussed with the team manager leading to a review of supervised contact and arrangements made to ensure Children Social Care were able to meet the agreed level of contact by ensuring all contacts were appropriately supervised.

### **Diversity Issues**

- 4.7 When compared with Bracknell Forest under 18 year old population (BFC stat share figures) it appears that the number of LAC children from minority ethnic backgrounds is reflective of the general population of the borough. It is essential the IRO Service along with colleagues in Children's Social Care work with all families taking into account their cultural, linguistic and religious beliefs and needs.

### **Example**

- 4.8 In one case the IRO raised concerns regarding the delay in a relative applying to the courts for a Special Guardianship Order for a young asylum seeker. Although an interpreter had been present at the review meeting, one was not present during verbal and written dialogue with the family solicitor. The solicitor closed the case due to no response or communication from the family. When this was discovered at review consent was sought from the family to contact the Solicitor with the agreement of the family it was decided the social worker would be copied into all correspondence from the solicitor and an interpreter would be available to the family on all legal matters relating to the Special Guardianship Order. This ensured that the family was aware of what was happening and they were supported throughout the process with the outcome being that a Special Guardianship Order was made in the young person's favour.

### **Identifying good practice**

- 4.9 In accordance with the quality assurance function of the IRO role, it is important that the IRO Service 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 Service carries out this function both formally and informally. The quarterly report to Children's Services Management Team identifies both good practice and areas for development. Informal feedback to social workers takes place regularly as appropriate and in written form when the review meeting minutes are sent to the Social Worker.
- 4.10 The IRO Service has developed a feedback form detailing things that have gone well in reviews, things that have impacted negatively on the child and areas requiring further action or attention, with the aim of providing regular and balanced feedback. If a management response is required and this is not received or considered satisfactory by the IRO a Practice Memo will be sent in order to escalate the challenge.

### **Positive comments made by children and young people in their consultation documents about their social workers**

- 4.11 'I like my social worker, she is good to talk to and she helps me'  
'She is cool and sometimes makes me laugh'  
'She listens to me and does what she says she is going to do'  
'I like her but I don't see her as much as I would like to'  
'She is alright, sometimes she annoys me but she does help me and if I ask her to do something for me she does'

### **Foster care**

- 4.12 The IRO monitors stability of placements for children looked after as this can have a direct impact on the outcomes and life chances. There continues to be an increase in the stability of placements for Looked After Children and young people In Bracknell Forest. In September 2011 60% of looked after children

under the age of 16 were in the same placement for 2 years or more. In March 2012 this figure rose to 76.2%.

4.13 The IRO Service also notes an increase in the recruitment of local Foster Carers as this enables more children to remain in their local community where appropriate, which has a very positive impact on them. During the review period there has continued to be a steady growth in children and young people remaining in the local area. In September 2011, 49 looked after children were placed with Bracknell Forest carers. In March 2012 this increased to 55 children.

**4.14 Positive comments made by children and young people in their consultation documents about their foster carers**

'Everything is fine here, we get on well'

'They love me and want to help me'

'They love me and say they will not give up on me'

'We get on well and I am treated like one of the family, they are funny at times and make me laugh'

**4.15 Positive comments made by parents in their consultation documents and in review meetings about foster carers.**

'I want to thank my child's foster carers for the good job they are doing supporting my daughter'

'I think the best place for my child is to be with me, but I also want to say I think my child's foster carer is doing a very good job and I am pleased my child is being cared for by them'

'I get on well with my child's foster carers, they keep me informed of what is going on and I am thankful for the support they offer my child'

## **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>3</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>3</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 children becoming looked after in Bracknell Forest (excluding short break care) has increased over the reporting period. Between March 2011 and September 2012 the looked after numbers went from 87 to 100 children. This is an increase of 15%. In addition to the statutory review process and timescales outlined in this report 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>4</sup>. For some children, therefore, reviews can 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 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 and this causes pressure at times on the IRO team' diary.
- 5.5 The volume of Reviews is 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 Service and a commitment by social workers to the statutory time requirements.

## **Induction and Training**

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

## **6 AREAS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT**

The following areas have been identified for development in the next review period.

- For IRO service to further develop and monitor the IRO feedback form.
- For IRO service to ensure practice memos are used to raise issues formally when required or when issues raised in the Feedback Forms are not resolved in a satisfactory or timely way.
- For IRO service to respond to national and local policy and development round key issues; for example Adoption and Long term foster placements

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<sup>4</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%.

- For IRO service to work with CSC and CPDO to engage harder to reach young people in their LAC reviews.
- For IRO service to work with CSC and the CDPO to encourage Children and Young people to chair their own reviews
- IRO service and CDPO to develop a child friendly version of IRO annual report which will be made available for young people in the future.
- Continue to achieve 100% of Looked After Reviews to be held within timescales
- Improve the number of parents participating in their children's LAC review

### **Improving standards**

- To maintain the high rates of participation and to continually improve the quality of child participation in LAC reviews.
- To increase the participation of birth parents in the next period. Firstly, for the IRO service to understand why some birth parents do not participate in LAC reviews and to work with CSC to improve this percentage prior to the next annual report.
- For IRO service to monitor the performance of LAC review reports completed within timescales and reports being shared in advance with parents. CSC to work to improve this performance prior to the next annual report.

## **7 CONCLUSION**

Over the period of this review, the IRO service has continued to respond to the challenges of 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 requirements. 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.

**Carol Lamkin, Independent Reviewing Officer**  
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**October 2012**