

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT

April 2013 – March 2014

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the eighth annual report of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service in Bracknell Forest. This report will cover the period from 1st April 2012 to 31st March 2014.

The IRO Handbook states that the annual report should cover:

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

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

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

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

The participation of children and young people, parents and carers and the contribution of partner agencies is detailed including a case study and comments from children and young people who are looked after. Listening to the voice of the child and enabling children and young people to participate is a key function of the IRO role. Performance in this area is good with 100% of children participating in their reviews in a variety of ways.

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

The report demonstrates work undertaken to further develop challenge and dispute resolution processes which are important to have in place to enable the IRO Service to fulfil their independent functions and make challenges where it is felt that decisions and actions are not contributing to good outcomes for the child or young person. Some examples given in this section demonstrate the challenge that has taken place and the positive responses from Children's Social Care to addressing those challenges. This section also highlights good practice examples.

The final section identifies a range of issues that impact on services for looked after children and include the introduction of new legislation, continued increase in numbers of children looked after and ensuring caseloads for individual IRO's allow capacity for them to fulfil their statutory function.

A list of areas for development in 2014 / 15 conclude the 8th annual report.


A SUMMARY OF KEY AREAS OF PROGRESS DURING 2013 / 14

- As a service we have taken account of the Ofsted and NCB research and have been focussing our efforts in key areas to ensure we are meeting the requirements of the IRO Handbook effectively and can demonstrate impact.
- **Outcome** – We assessed our service in relation to the Ofsted research findings and the Head of Performance Management and Governance presented a paper to the Corporate Parenting Panel setting out the aspects of the role which are working well and the areas for development.
- In last year's report making more formal challenges was identified as an area for development. We were not following a consistent format and there was not clear evidence of escalation or dispute resolution.
- **Outcome** -We have reviewed the Dispute Resolution Process and are using this process consistently across the service to raise issues where relevant and necessary.
- The Department Management Team for Children, Young People and Learning responded to the increased pressures on the IRO Service due to increasing numbers of children becoming looked after and increased case loads for each IRO. This had been having an impact on the IRO service fulfilling the range of statutory responsibilities including arranging pre meetings and monitoring the care plan between reviews.
- **Outcome** - A part time IRO post has been agreed for a period of one year. Some additional time limited administrative support has also been provided to the team.
- The IRO Service identified some areas for development following a themed audit and made a series of recommendations to Children's Social Care regarding further developments in practice.
- **Outcome** – Audit was presented to Children's Social Care and they are in the process of responding to the recommendations which include further developments around care plan format and recording practice.
- The IRO Service had identified in previous reports the importance of networking to share knowledge and good practice.
- **Outcome** - The IRO Service has been actively engaged in the South East IRO Regional Network, this has been instrumental in progressing further understanding of key changes in legislation, training on changes taking place, and regional work on developing the role of the IRO and learning from good practice in other areas.
- As an outcome of last year's report the IRO Service committed to developing ways to provide feedback to young people about the annual report in a format that was child friendly.
- **Outcome** - the Participation and Development Worker arranged for a group of young people who are looked after to interview the IROs about the key points from last years IRO annual report. They asked a number of questions about the role and the main findings of the last IRO annual report and a summary of the interview will be published in the SILSIP news letter. It is hoped that this process will help to reinforce the role of the IROs in the Borough.
- During the year a recommendation was made as a result of a Safeguarding Practice Diagnostic to develop systems to undertake a joint process for children who are subject to Child Protection Plans and LAC or in proceedings. We had begun to combine processes by holding joint CP Conferences and LAC reviews for some cases but did not have an agreed process or criteria for doing this.
- **Outcome** - The IRO Manager has drafted a paper on combined processes which has been agreed with managers in Children's Social Care. Joint meetings will be determined on a case by case basis to ensure the best process and outcome for the child or young person at the centre.

1. PURPOSE OF SERVICE AND LEGAL CONTEXT

- 1.1 The Independent Review Officer (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook 2010, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the Review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Looked After Children (LAC) and for challenging drift and delay.
- 1.2 The recently published National Children's Bureau research entitled 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings in regards to the efficacy of IRO services and outlines a number of important recommendations.
- 1.3 The IRO Service in Bracknell Forest wishes to highlight areas we believe to be essential part of the service:
- Ensuring IRO's have the right skills: particularly the ability to communicate with children and young people, and to know how and when to challenge.
 - Have access to expert advice & resources, including independent legal advice and opportunities for reflective practice.
 - Dispute resolution protocols that work, from informal conversations to the escalation of cases to senior management.
 - Ensuring 'child-centred' IRO's, who demonstrate their commitment to each child and work out the best way to seek their views.
 - Having a focus on outcomes, and holding agencies to account for their contribution towards these.

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



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

2. PROFILE OF THE IRO SERVICE

2.1 The legislation and regulations specify;

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

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

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

2.4 The staffing complement for the IRO Service is:

- Conference and Review Team Manager (24 hours per week) - this role manages the IRO's, Child Protection Chairs and is also the Local Authority Designated Officer for allegations against the workforce.
- One full time Independent Reviewing Officer (37 hours per week)
- Two Part time Independent Reviewing Officer (34 hours per week)
- Administration support is provided by a small team supporting both the IRO process and Child Protection Conferencing.
- The Independent Reviewing Officers in the team are all female and white British.

2.5 Every child who becomes looked after by the local authority is allocated an IRO within 5 days of becoming looked after. The Officers hold a case discussion meeting before making a decision as to who will become allocated as IRO. Where possible, the same IRO will chair the reviews and monitor the child's care plan throughout the period the child is looked after.

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

2.7. The IRO Handbook recommends that a caseload for a full time IRO should be between 50-70. Prior to additional IRO resources being allocated the case load recommendation was not being met. The addition of a half time IRO post for one year has contributed to reducing case load levels in line with the recommendations in the Guidance.

3 PROFILE OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN IN BRACKNELL FOREST

- 3.1 On the 31 March 2014 there were 113 children and young people who were looked after. This is an increase from the 31 March 2013 where the number of looked after children was 103 (an increase of 9.7%).
- 3.2 The number of children who are looked after can vary from month to month as children move in and out of the system. During the period of 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014, 54 children have become LAC and 48 have ceased to be LAC. Children can cease to be LAC for a number of reasons which include for example returning home to live with parents, adoption, or leaving care.
- 3.3 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2014, 60 were female and 53 were male.
- 3.4 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2014:
- 10 were under the age of one.
 - 13 were aged one to four.
 - 20 were aged five to nine.
 - 46 were aged ten to fifteen.
 - 24 were aged sixteen and over.
- 3.5 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2014:
- 80 % (90 children and young people) were identified as White British.
 - 6% (7 children) were identified as any other white background.
 - 14% were identified from a range of other backgrounds including any other Asian (3%) , African (1%), White and Black African (3%), White and Black Caribbean (4%), White and Asian (1%), any other mixed background (1%), any other ethnic group (“%)

Legal Status

- 3.6. The legal status of children looked after on 31 March 2014 is shown in the table below, alongside figures for the same period in 2013. The comparator figures show a decrease in the number of children subject to Placement Orders (granted when court proceedings conclude and the plan for adoption is agreed).

This includes children placed in adoptive families under adoption regulations but prior to an Adoption Order being made. There has been a small increase in the number of children subject to a Care Order and a significant increase in the number of children placed under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (where a child is placed with the agreement of the parent). Further analysis will be needed in order to determine the reasons for the changes but it is suggested that the changes may reflect changes in legislation over the last year.

Legal Status	March 2013	March 2014.
Care Order -Section 31 The Children Act 1989	32	38
Interim Care Order -Section 33 The Children Act 1989	13	5
Section 20 The Children Act 1989	39	56
Placement Order Adoption and Children Act 2002	18	13
On remand	1	1
Total	103	113

Legal status of LAC on 31 March 2014 and 31 March 2013

Adoption Activity

- 3.7 Nationally 3980 LAC were adopted in the year ending 31.3.13; an increase of 15% in 2012 and 20% from 2009. In Bracknell Forest, the overall number of children placed for adoption or under Special Guardianship Orders raised significantly this year from 8.3% to 16.9%. In the year ending 31.3.14, 10 Adoption Orders; 5 Special Guardianship Orders and 4 Residence Orders were granted. Of the 10 children who were adopted, 7 (70%) were placed within 12 months of the agency decision. The IRO service views this as good performance and will continue to monitor the timeliness of adoption placements. The number of children requiring permanency is predicted to remain high over the next year. The IRO service also notes the progress in relation to Life Story work and Later Life letters, which CSC are required to prepare for children when they are in the process of being adopted. These documents form a record for the child to refer to in the future. They also support carers to help the child understand why he or she has been adopted. Additional resources were allocated to cover the increase in this work and a system is now in place to monitor the completion of Life Story work and Later Life letters. The IROs will assist with the monitoring in LAC reviews.

Timeliness of Statutory Reviews

- 3.8 Under provisions set out in the IRO Handbook (2010) local authorities are required to review the case of any child who is looked after or provided with accommodation within the following timescales:
- The first review must take place within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after or is provided with accommodation.
 - The second review must be carried out no later than 3 months after the first review and subsequent reviews must be carried out not more than 6 months after the date of the previous review meeting.
- 3.9 Each IRO has a designated case load and is responsible for ensuring that each child's review takes place within timescales. The IRO also ensures that care planning is robust and that young people, parents, carers and relevant professionals have the opportunity to participate fully in the review process.
- 3.10 In certain situations it may be necessary to bring forward a child's review meeting if:
- There is a change of placement or other substantial change to the care plan.
 - The IRO has specific concerns about the child and directs that the review be brought forward.
 - There is a request from the child or parent for a review to be brought forward.

- 3.11 A total of **327** looked after children reviews were completed during the last year. This is a significant rise from **277** in the previous year. This appears to be due to additional reviews being convened when there are significant changes to the care plan or a child moves to a new type of placement.
- 3.12. On the 31st March 2014, 96% of LAC reviews were carried out within statutory timescales; this is a slight decrease from reviews within timescales in 2013 which was 98%. This slight decrease in performance equates to 4 review meetings being held outside of statutory timescales; two of the LAC reviews were delayed in order to meet the needs of the birth father to attend the LAC meeting, one was due to a major accident on the motorway on the way to the LAC review and the meeting needing to be postponed. Only one review out of timescales was due to a miscalculation on timescales, since this has happened there has been a focus on strengthening the administrative processes to monitor and check timescales of all reviews.
- 3.13 One area of important activity in ensuring that LAC reviews stay within timescales is close and effective liaison with Social Workers, this takes place via face to face contact and an email system is in place to notify workers of any new children becoming looked after, and also any changes in circumstances that may lead to a placement change.

4 PARTICIPATION IN REVIEWS

Child participation in LAC reviews

- 4.1 A central strand of the role of the IRO is to ensure that the voice of the child is central to the review process. During the year 99% of children aged four and above were able to participate in their LAC review meeting. The IRO's also visit children under 4 in their placements as part of the LAC review process, this enables the IRO to observe the child in placement and how they interact with their carers and other significant people.

Child Participation	Mar-11	Mar-12	Mar-13	Mar-14
Number who participated in all reviews	68	78	82	88
% of LAC who participated in reviews	97%	100%	100%	99%

Method of participation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Child under 4years old	26%	22%	27%	17%
Child attends the review and is able to speak for themselves	48%	46%	50%	48%
Child attends and an advocate speaks for them	1%	1%	0%	0%
Child attends and conveys their views non verbally	1%	1%	0%	2%
Child attends but does not speak or convey their feelings	3%	2%	4%	5%
Child does not attend but asks an advocate to speak for them	19%	27%	18%	25%
Child does not attend but conveys their views to the review	1%	0%	0%	0%
Child does not attend and does not convey their views to the review	0%	0%	0%	1%

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

- Arranging a separate meeting with the child
- The child being supported by a formal or informal advocate in the meeting.
- The child being supported to write a letter which will be shared at the meeting
- The child being supported to make a DVD which was shown at the review meeting

4.3 The decision about the venue of a LAC review is based on the child's wishes, parental participation and safety issues. LAC reviews are held in the child's placement or at a venue that is considered appropriate such as the Family Centre, children's Centre or Portman Close. Pre- LAC review meetings and IRO home visits to a child are held in a number of venues, depending on the child's wishes. The aim is not to hold meetings during the school day. Often these pre- meetings occur in the placement, but parks cafes etc are used at times. Some LAC reviews were held over several meetings as it is not always appropriate for children to attend the whole meeting but it remains important for the child's voice to be heard. The IRO Service continues to promote participation by children and young people with disabilities. Careful consideration is given to the choice of venue and the support needs of the child to facilitate and encourage meaningful participation.

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

"My IRO knows all about me so I do not have to talk about the past. I can ring her if I have a problem"

"My social worker tells me everything I need to know I like her".

In a SILSIP session, some young people felt they wanted more say in the time of their reviews, particularly in the school holidays when they would prefer to have them later in the day.

"My IRO knows all about me so I do not have to talk about the past. I can ring her if I have a problem"

"My IRO is fab! She listens to me and helps me in meetings"

Case Study – Child Participation

A good example of participation is of a young man who the IRO has been working with for a period of three years. When this young man first became looked after he found it very difficult to attend any form of meeting and at his first LAC review he choose to sit in his bedroom and speak to the IRO through the bedroom door.

Through building up relationships with his carers, social worker and IRO over a three year period this young person has developed his social skills to now be able to participate fully in his LAC reviews. At his last review he was confident to greet his guests, help his carers to prepare a lunch for everyone and appropriately socialise with everyone before the start of the meeting.

He was confident to make a presentation in front of seven adults. His presentation included photographs of himself at home, on holiday and in school. He also had a section about his progress and a number of questions he wished to ask at the review meeting.

This is a good example of a young person participating fully in the process and more importantly having some ownership of his review meeting. He was able to use the time productively and was given answers to his direct questions. This was a really positive experience for him.

Parental participation in LAC reviews

4.4 The IRO has a responsibility to gain the views of parents within the review process, this is important as it helps the IRO to understand the way in which the child is viewed by parents and to gain an idea of the life experiences of the child. One exception is that birth parents do not attend LAC review meetings when a child is on a placement order and about to be placed for adoption. Their views are sought and communicated to the meeting but they do not attend. There are many ways a parent can be involved including:

- Attending the formal meeting.
- Completing and returning consultation documents.
- A separate meeting can be arranged with the allocated IRO.
- Telephone / email communication with the allocated IRO.
- Via a Social worker / Advocate.

4.5 During the period 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014, a total of 184 parents (127 mothers and 57 fathers) attended their child's review meeting. Others shared their views through a conversation with the IRO by telephone or completed consultation documents. Some parents chose to use other forms of communication such as email, text, using advocates, giving views to the child's social worker or having a separate meeting with the IRO. Some parents' views were not obtained, this is due to a number of reasons including the parent being deceased, their whereabouts unknown, a Placement Order being in place or the child having been placed in an adoptive placement.

Participation and contribution of partner agencies

4.6 Participation from partner agencies is strong in Bracknell Forest. Health visitors often attend review meetings and give detailed information on the child's progress. Schools, the Virtual School team and any specialist units are usually actively involved in relation to educational progress. The IRO Service notes there have been some reductions in the CAMHS resource for LAC which the IRO Service feels leaves a gap in terms of the support offered to LAC and in terms of contribution to LAC reviews.

- 4.7 The IROs meet with the LAC nurse every six months to discuss the wider issues relating to the health of LAC and their views about having medicals.
- 4.8 Looked after children of school age have a PEP meeting within 20 days of becoming LAC and then at six monthly intervals. The IROs read PEPs before reviews and liaise with the Virtual School team to monitor any issues or actions arising from PEP meetings between reviews.
- 4.9 The IRO attends the Life Chances meeting and uses this opportunity to raise issues relating to particular cases. This has aided communication between the IRO service and other multi agency professionals involved with LAC.
- 4.10 The IRO Service has continued to work with the Child Participation Development Officer to encourage children and young people to develop skills to enable them to share their feelings and views regarding their care arrangements in positive ways during LAC review meetings and to have the support of advocates if requested. One of the tasks of the Child Participation Development Officer is to support Looked After Children in Bracknell Forest to have a say via the SILSIP Group (Say it Loud Say it Proud). Members of the IRO Service have attended SILSIP activities at Oakwood Youth Challenge, the Halloween activity day and a SILSIP meeting in August. These events allow the IROs to have an opportunity to meet with the children and young people outside of the formality of the review process.
- 4.11 This year the IROs worked with the Child Participation and Development Officer to arrange an interview to summarise last years IRO annual report and disseminate this in the SILSIP newsletter.
- 4.12 The Youth Offending Team is invited to the young person's LAC review meeting when they are involved. The contribution of the YOS worker continues to be positive and the IRO service have been working with YOS to embed new legislation regarding young people placed on remand under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO). The new act states that if a young person is remanded into custody they will immediately become a Looked After Child of the Local Authority where he/she usually resides. The young person will be allocated a Social Worker and an IRO will be allocated.
- 4.13. Members of the IRO service have been attending Berkshire CAFCASS liaison meetings which are an opportunity to meet Guardians and discuss the interface between Guardians and IROs. A national and Berkshire CAFCASS / IRO Protocol has been agreed. This is positive progress as this liaison is another area which needs to be in place to enable IROs to access court documents and monitor the child's court care plan while remaining independent of Children's Social Care.

5. PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Performance Monitoring

- 5.1 A key aspect of the IRO Service is in supporting ongoing quality assurance activity as part of the Quality Assurance Strategy for the Children, Young People and Learning Department. The IRO Service reports on a regular basis to Children's Social Care Management Team. This report provides a range of qualitative and quantitative information taken from an audit form completed after each LAC Review takes place. The information collected from the audit activity is collated into a quarterly report and presented to Senior Managers in children's Social Care. This is an opportunity to highlight good practice and note areas of concern and performance against national and local indicators. The process of looking at performance quarterly ensures that senior management have an oversight of how LAC reviews are working and whether practitioners require further training in specific areas of practice.
- 5.2 The IRO Service has regular meetings with the Head of Service for Looked after Children to discuss and highlight developments, good practice and areas of concern. Issues raised with Head of Service during 2013-14 have included; Care Plans not being updated, LAC review reports not provided in advance of review meetings, delay in finding foster placements for

some children awaiting permanency through long term fostering, social workers not informing IROs about significant events.

- 5.3 The IRO Service has a role to monitor and maintain an overview of the Care Plan (including Court Care Plans) and the Pathway Plan of each Looked After Child at the review meeting and between reviews. In order to do this effectively the IRO needs to have pre meetings with social workers, to speak to carers and parents, to read the child's file and speak to the child between review meetings. The social worker in turn, needs to update the IRO on significant events and provide an updated Care Plan and a report for the LAC review. All the requirements and timescales for reviews are set out in the IRO handbook. The IRO Service provides regular training for Social Workers on the roles and responsibilities for LAC, and also meets with new Social Workers as part of their induction.
- 5.4 The IRO Service contributes to tracking meetings which monitor the provision of adoptive placements for LAC awaiting permanence through adoption. This is a useful joint mechanism for tracking the timeliness of placements. The IRO service has raised the issue of timeliness of long term foster placements for children who cannot be adopted but still require permanence through long term fostering and have been discussing how this group of children can also be tracked using this process.
- 5.6 The IRO Service also contributes to foster carers' reviews by completing a consultation form. This allows for the IRO to comment on good practice and also areas of concern.
- 5.7 The IRO Service also works with the Placement Officer with regard to quality assuring residential placements. During this review period the IRO Service has raised issues regarding contracted services provided for Bracknell Forest LAC. These have then been addressed through meetings with the provider, Head of Service and the Placement officer. The IRO Service have been informed of the decisions made and recognise the commitment of the department to ensure all children and young people are appropriately placed in placements which meet their needs.

Quality Assurance of the IRO Service

- 5.8 In the last year the IRO service has developed a team audit programme which quality assures aspects of the IROs work. This includes themed audits, peer auditing of reports and decisions and actions, observations of IROs by the Team Manager and the Head of Service and auditing of administrative processes. We aim to develop this further in the coming year, particularly the peer auditing so that the team can learn from one another.

Management oversight

- 5.9 The role of the IRO manager is set out in the handbook. The Team Manager supervises the IROs monthly and monitors their caseload and overall performance and training needs.
- 5.10 A monthly IRO business Meeting is led by the Team Manager, and attended by the Head of Performance Management and Governance this enables management oversight of areas in development, progress and issues being experienced by the IRO Service.
- 5.11 Ofsted recommends that senior managers regularly review performance to assure themselves of the quality of the IRO service and the impact and difference it is making for children, young people and families. In Bracknell Forest the Director Children, Young People and Learning has set up regular meetings with the Conference and Review Team Manager and the Head of Performance Management and Governance to report on IRO activity. This supports the DCS statutory responsibilities as identified in guidance. Two meetings have take place so far.

Training and Peer support

- 5.12 Members of the team have undertaken training appropriate to their needs. As a whole team we commissioned legal updates training and a training session on chairing meetings using signs of safety (a way of working that balances assessment of risks and strengths to help manage risk and support good decision making).The Head of Performance Management

and Governance and the IROs have completed the SILSIP “Do you know” training, which was developed by looked after young people to help practitioners to understand what it feels like to be a looked after child. The SE regional group is looking into specialist modular training options for IROs across the region.

- 5.13 Members of the IRO Service have been regularly attending the South East Regional Network which meets three times per year. These meetings have been refocused and well attended in the last year and the group has been working through new guidance and research and feeding back SE region IRO views to the regional IRO meeting which is attended by DFE representatives.

6 CHALLENGE AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION

- 6.1 In November 2013 a revised protocol for dispute resolution was introduced to provide a clear framework and structure for the IRO to be able to raise issues of concern and for Children’s Social Care to respond in a using a formal process. The new process allows for a number of stages to be accessed in order to resolve an issue or concern which escalates appropriately if the issue remains unresolved to the satisfaction of the IRO. The informal and formal disputes are recorded. Since November 2013 there have been 21 informal and 3 formal disputes raised. In addition many issues or concerns are managed informally via email or through discussions with Social Workers and their Supervisor which often allows small concerns to be dealt with swiftly.

Informal challenges have included:

- Delay in family finding for Long term fostering.
- Social Worker visits to LAC not occurring within statutory timescales.
- Drift in follow up actions in the agreed care plan.
- Concerns relating to unsuitable accommodation for some of the older young people in Bracknell’s care.
- Social Work reports not always being provided for LAC reviews.
- Level of contact and other contact issues

Formal disputes raised have included;

- Concerning delay for young person in finding a long term foster placement.
- Withdrawal of CAMHS specialist support and the impact on a child.

Examples of Challenges made by the IRO Service

- 6.2 **Informal Challenge** - The IRO Service raised a concern that visits by a Social Worker for a child were not being completed within required timescales, and there had been some difficulties for the young person at school which included some incidents of bullying.

The IRO requested that regular LAC visits within agreed timescales to be completed and recorded on the child’s file.

Outcome – The Social Worker was supported by the Manager to ensure visits took place on time, the LACES Team worked on the issues of bullying within the school and a plan put in place to address it. The IRO felt the concerns had been listened to and the support for the young person was appropriate to the circumstances.

- 6.3 **Informal Challenge** – The IRO raised a concern about the impact of a placement breakdown on a young person’s emotional wellbeing. A number of options were possible but not confirmed to the young person.

The IRO requested that a decision was made in a timely way to enable the Social Worker to work with the young person to prepare them for the move.

Outcome – A review of the needs of the young person led to agreement for a local placement to be identified which enabled the young person to continue attending school. A decision provided the time to prepare the young person for a move. A multi-agency plan was put in place which allowed for a good support package to be in place for the young person. The Social Worker also provided more intensive support during the transition and settling in period.

- 6.4 **Formal Challenge** – The IRO raised a concern regarding the impact of the withdrawal of CAMHS therapeutic support for a young person. This was felt to have an impact on the young person who had been identified as being in need of some ongoing therapeutic work.

Outcome – Following a formal challenge it was agreed that the young person would receive ongoing therapeutic work which was a good outcome for the young person.

Examples of Good Practice

- 6.5 The IRO Service observes many areas of good practice on a day to day basis and would like to note that the ongoing commitment and support given to children and young people by a wide range of professionals. Some examples of good practice noted include:

- The excellent work undertaken by a Social Worker to help a young person build a relationship with parents and to facilitate the child becoming cared for by the father which prevented the need to progress care proceedings. The outcome for the young person is that they are settled with the father and have regular contact with the mother.
- The IRO noted positive transition work undertaken for a young person on a move from a short term foster placement. The young person was well supported by the Foster Carers and the Family Placement Social Worker during the move. Both sets of Foster Carers worked closely together leading to a smooth transition from a short term placement to a long term placement.
- An evidence based assessment for one child by a child psychologist and social worker resulted in a plan for reunification back into the family home with clear plans for the family to receive support and monitoring through a child in need plan.
- Positive work in a residential setting to support a young man to participate. One young man with severe disabilities and limited verbal communication tends to become very anxious and upset when introduced to new adults or when he has to attend LAC review meetings. This young man lives in a cottage with a team of support staff around him. The staff team has been consistent and good working relationships have developed between the staff team and the young person. His key worker helps to prepare him for reviews by discussing who will be at the meeting and putting photographs in his cottage of the key people who help him and attend meetings, (his social worker , IRO and transitional worker) so he is aware of who will be there. The key worker also uses sign language and an i pad app to enable the young person to express his feelings and views to the meeting. The staff have helped him to create a DVD for the review. The young man chooses the photographs and the music for the DVD and then he adds his own words using his i pad to share his thoughts and feelings. The DVD is shared at the review meeting and this has helped him feel more confident to attend part of the meeting.
- Positive impact from an independent visitor referral. One young person, who was an asylum seeker from Afghanistan, requested an Independent Visitor after the role had been discussed at a LAC review. A referral was made and a great deal of time and thought was taken when matching the young man with his visitor, taking account of his culture and language. Unfortunately it was not possible to match the young person with an independent visitor of the same nationality or culture but a match was made, using

interpreters at the initial referral stage and first meeting. At the young person's LAC review he informed the IRO that he is getting on well with his Independent Visitor and that he is practising his spoken English during their time together. They are also learning from each other about their different cultures and had been sightseeing in London, had been to see a Bollywood Movie together and had shared different foods together.

7. ISSUES IMPACTING ON THE SERVICE FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

- 7.1 There have been significant changes to the family justice system in relation to care, supervision and family proceedings including the introduction of a 26 week timescale for Care Proceedings once initiated. All these changes have had an impact on the plans and timescales for children, and the IRO Service. While it is hoped this will prevent delay for the child it is likely to have resource implications for all those involved in the care process including social work teams, IRO Service and placements with more work being required before proceedings are initiated.
- 7.2 The relatively high number of children in Bracknell Forest subject to placement orders indicates a significant number of children who will require a permanent adoptive or long term placement. In recent years as the number of children in court proceedings has increased it has been a challenge to secure adoptive placements for some children in spite of an increase in resources within the family finding team to assist with this. Matching and placing children in a timely way requires ongoing work and resources and it is still very challenging to find adoptive families and for older children, children with complex needs and sibling groups.
- 7.3 There has been turnover in social work staff with a number of managers and social workers retiring or leaving. New more permanent staff are being recruited but it is important to note that staff turnover does have an impact on children and young people some who may have had several changes of social worker within the year. It is very important to ensure that all new social workers and managers receive induction about the IRO and LAC processes and standards of practice when they begin.
- 7.4 The workload of the IRO service has continued to be consistently busy and demanding particularly as a significant number of Looked After Children live out of the area and some at a considerable distance from Bracknell due to their specialist care needs. Some have experienced a higher number of placement moves which has resulted in additional reviews within a six month review period. The number of reviews per year has increased by 18% while the number of LAC has only increased by 9.7%. This activity on placement changes and bringing forward reviews has had an impact on the workload of the team and will need to be monitored.

8 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The IRO Service has had a very busy and productive year. The Number of children who enter into or leave the looked after system remains high and this has placed additional pressures on the IRO Service. The pressures have been further impacted by the changes in Family Law and an increased focus on adoption. The IRO Service has worked hard to ensure it is able to deliver to a high standard and there has been an increased focus on the quality assurance of support to looked after children and young people both within the team and with colleagues and managers in Children's Social Care.
- 8.2 The IRO Service notes the ongoing hard work and commitment of Social Workers and other professionals in supporting young people who are looked after and the quality of the relationship with Children's Social Care in particular remains a strength.
- 8.3 There are many challenges in the coming year which will require the IRO Service to continue to focus on quality, improvement and ensuring the voice of the child remains at the centre of the process, the developments in this year have been positive and we look forward

to ensuring they continue to support good practice and positive outcomes for our children and young people.

9 ACTIONS FOR 2014 / 15

9.1 As a result of completing this report and reviewing progress in the past year the IRO Service has identified the following actions to be addressed during 2014 / 15.

- Focus on further development of ways to maintain contact with children and young people between reviews and monitor plans.
- Investigate the use of technology such as “Skype” or “Face time” to provide more accessible options for children and young people to communicate with their IRO.
- Focus on further developing ways to include parents in the review process in a way that is most appropriate to the circumstances.
- Review some of the various systems and forms for recording the outcome of the LAC review.
- Continued focus on performance monitoring and quality assurance. This will include ongoing observations of practice by Team Manager and Head of Performance Management and Governance, audit and peer review processes.
- Continue to deliver workshop / seminars to Social Workers and Managers to ensure the role of IRO is clearly understood and new staff have good induction.
- Continue to contribute to the South East Regional IRO group.
- Monitor the impact of additional IRO staff and seek more permanent solution to capacity.

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Date 30.5.14