

TO: EXECUTIVE MEMBER CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND LEARNING

DATE: 14 July 2015

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

1 PURPOSE OF DECISION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the 9th Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service to the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning

2 RECOMMENDATION

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

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 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 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 IRO Handbook was one of those documents.
- 3.4 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.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

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

5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 5.1 The attached report sets out the work of the IRO Service over the period 1st April 2014- 31st March 2015. The report highlights good practice and identifies areas where challenges have been made by the IRO Service and the measures that have been taken to address these.
- 5.2 The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and consequent IRO Handbook reinforces and strengthens the role of the IRO enabling more effective independent

oversight and scrutiny of the child's case. This is 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.

- 5.3. The report provides an account of the activity of the IRO Service and 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:
- The number of children being looked after at 31 March 2015 was 104 (at the end of March 2014 there were 113 LAC).
 - Whilst the total of children being looked after is counted at the end of the year, it is important to note that this figure will vary from month to month as children move in and out of the system, for example during the year 48 children became looked after and 58 ceased to be looked after.
 - A total of 307 looked after children reviews were completed during the last year. This is slightly lower than in the previous year (317) which reflects the lower number of children looked after during this review period.
 - A minority of children experience a higher number of reviews, this is due to a number of different factors including changes to the child's care plan and unplanned placement moves.
 - On the 31st March 2015, 100% of LAC reviews were carried out within statutory timescales. This is an improvement on the previous year (96%).
 - Communication systems are in place for Children's Social Care when notifying the IRO of any potential changes or when a child is accommodated.
 - Child participation in reviews remains high with 100% of children over the age of four participating at the end of March 2015; the report identifies some comments made by children and identifies two case studies to demonstrate the ways in which they participate.
 - The Life Chances Team has made a positive contribution to developing multi agency support and monitoring for LAC, and the contribution of a range of partners has a significant impact on key areas of need such as health, education and emotional wellbeing.
 - The positive impact of the Child Participation Development Officer which supports the effective participation of children and young people looked after including coordinating the Advocacy requests for children and in managing SiLSiP (Children in Care council).
 - The impact of the investment of the additional IRO resources has been positive in terms of reducing the case load of the IRO's and enabling them to more broadly fulfil the requirements of the IRO Handbook more.
- 5.4 In addition to the positive practice, the report also provides examples of challenge which are built into the IRO role, and how these have been resolved. The IRO Service has worked throughout the year to embed more robust challenge where this is felt to be required and the Dispute Resolution Process has been used more consistently with 19 informal challenges being made and 11 formal challenges using the agreed procedure. This provides clear evidence of challenge and outcomes.
- 5.5 A further area for ongoing development this year has been in improving the performance and quality assurance activity. The IRO Service reports quarterly to Children's Social Care Management Team, and the IRO undertakes an audit following each review. The Team Manager and Head of Service have completed direct observations of the IRO in reviews and undertaken some audits of key areas

of activity in the team. One outcome of this activity is the introduction of a new record of review template, written by the IRO after each meeting, this is now written as if to the child and is more child centred as a result.

- 5.6 The report identifies some of the national legislative and policy changes that have been taking place that impact on looked after children. The IRO Service continues to work with partners to embed these changes and play the appropriate role in implementing and monitoring impact.
- 5.7 The IRO Service has also actively engaged with regional and national IRO networks and has contributed to a number of regional and national meetings. There is further work planned on a national level to develop a national IRO website and to develop a set of standards for IRO's.

6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Borough Solicitor

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

Borough Treasurer

- 6.2 The Borough Treasurer is satisfied that reporting on the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer over the period of 1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015 presents no significant financial implications.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.3 The IRO Service is specifically for all children and young people who are looked after and as such includes a wide range of vulnerable children from variable backgrounds. Linked policies and procedures have been subject to EIA.

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

Contact for further information

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INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT

April 2014 – March 2015

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the ninth annual report of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service in Bracknell Forest, for the period from 1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015.

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

The final section identifies a range of issues that impact on services for looked after children 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 2015/16 concludes the 9th annual report.

A SUMMARY OF KEY AREAS OF PROGRESS DURING 2014 / 15

Secure sufficient resources to enable the IRO Service to fulfil the requirements of the IRO Handbook.

Outcome- A permanent additional part time IRO post (18.5 hours) has been secured for the team which has enabled caseloads to be reduced and has given IROs capacity to undertake the additional aspects of the IRO role. Further work is needed to balance the IRO case loads across the team to ensure a proportionate allocation of out of area cases. This will be done sensitively to ensure there is no change of IRO for the young person.

The provision of additional hours for the Team Manager has enabled further management oversight and service development opportunities.

Further development of more accessible options for children and young people to communicate with their IRO between reviews

Outcome This remains an area for development and we are considering how technology can assist the team. While these options would provide an additional form of communication we recognise the importance of face to face contact with children and young people.

Focus on further developing ways to include parents in the review process in a way that is most appropriate to the circumstances

Outcome This has been addressed on a case by case basis but remains an area for development and the number of parents participating in Looked After Children reviews has remained consistent to that of the previous year.

Review the systems and forms for recording the outcome of the LAC review to ensure they are more child focused

Outcome - The team completed a sample audit of the IRO 'Record of Discussion' reports and based on the findings revised the headings of the document to include new regulations such as 'staying put' and 'delegated responsibility'.

The Record of Discussion form has been changed to make it more child centred, the new format is written to the child/young person about their review. We plan to review this new approach and we will consult with others to decide if it should continue or be amended.

Continued focus on performance monitoring and quality assurance.

Outcome- This activity has taken place throughout the year and has led to ongoing improvements and developments in the service. Activity has included direct observations of practice by the Team Manager and Head of Service and some audit and internal peer review activity.

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

Outcome – Members of the IRO service have continued to provide one to one induction sessions for new staff. In addition we have provided six monthly update sessions for social workers. The team has delivered additional sessions in 2015 to reach more CSC staff.


Continue to contribute to the South East Regional IRO group

Outcome – IROs have actively participated in the SE regional group. Bracknell Forest hosted one meeting in February 2015 and we have submitted an article for the national IRO newsletter highlighting the 'Do You Know training'. The SE regional group has two representatives who sit on the national IRO group who meet with the Children's Minister. The group plans to develop national IRO standards and templates, an IRO dispute resolution process and is about to launch a national website where IROs can share good practice. The group has been looking at the impact of new legislation and research, including a national survey about whether LAC know their entitlements.

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

The foreword to the IRO Handbook, 2010 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 for the Service.
- 2.4 The staffing complement for the IRO Service is:
- Conference and Review Team Manager (30 hours per week). This role involves management of the IRO's, Child Protection Chairs and the Conference and review team administrators. The Conference and Review Team Manager also has the function of Local Authority Designated Officer and oversees the management of allegations against the children's workforce.
 - One full time Independent Reviewing Officer (37 hours per week)
 - Two part time Independent Reviewing Officers (18.5 and 16 hours per week)
 - Administrative 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 Independent Reviewing Officers hold a case discussion meeting before making a decision as to who will become allocated as IRO. Where possible, to provide the child with consistency the same IRO will chair the reviews and monitor the care plan throughout the period the child is looked after.
- The role of the IRO is to monitor and maintain an overview of the Care Plan (including Court Care Plans) and the Pathway Plan of each Looked After Child 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.
- 2.6 All looked after children, including children who are in an adoptive placement prior to an adoption order, have a 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 having 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 children. The current case load of the full time IRO in Bracknell is 58 children. This is a considerable decrease of cases compared to the previous year and has been achieved by the appointment of a permanent part time IRO. The caseloads of other part time team members are also within this limit.

3 PROFILE OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN IN BRACKNELL FOREST

- 3.1 On the 31 March 2015 there were 104 children and young people who were looked after. This is a slight decrease from the 31 March 2014 where the number of looked after children was 113.
- 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 2014 to 31 March 2015, 48 children became looked after and 58 have ceased to be looked after. Children can cease to be looked after for a number of reasons which include, returning home to live with parents, being adopted, or leaving care.
- 3.3 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2015, 50 were female and 54 were male.
- 3.4 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2015:
- 3 were under the age of one.
 - 14 were aged one to four.
 - 16 were aged five to nine.
 - 47 were aged ten to fifteen.
 - 24 were aged sixteen and over.
- 3.5 Of those children and young people looked after on 31 March 2015:
- 81% were identified as White British
 - 4% were identified as any other white background.
 - 15% were identified from a range of other backgrounds including any other Asian, African, White and Black African and any other ethnic group.

Legal Status

- 3.6. The legal status of children looked after on 31 March 2015 is shown in the table below, alongside figures for the same period in 2014. The comparator figures show an increase 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. The number of children subject to a Care Order has remained consistent with the figures from the previous year (2014). However there has been a significant decrease in the number of children placed under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (where a child is placed with the consent of the parent). This is reflective of a number of proceedings concluding during the year and the current legal advice regarding the use of Section 20.

Legal Status	March 2014	March 2015.
Care Order -Section 31 The Children Act 1989	38	34
Interim Care Order -Section 33 The Children Act 1989	5	9
Section 20 The Children Act 1989	56	42
Placement Order Adoption and Children Act 2002	13	19
On remand	1	0
Total	113	104

Legal status of LAC on 31 March 2014 and 31 March 2015

Adoption Activity

- 3.7 The number of children requiring and gaining permanency in Bracknell Forest has remained high. During 2014-15, 6 Adoption Orders; 9 Special Guardianship Orders and 1 Child Arrangement Order (formerly known as a Residence Order) were made. The number of Special Guardianship Orders has increased during this reporting period. This reflects a national trend and needs to be closely monitored. During this review period we have seen the introduction of the 'Adopt Berkshire' a pan Berkshire Adoption Service. This offers a wider scope for potential adoptive parents to be identified and an opportunity to prevent delay in achieving permanence for children.

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 307 looked after children reviews were completed during the last year. This is slightly lower than in the previous year (317) which reflects the lower number of children looked after during this review period. The number of reviews being conducted for a small minority of children year remains high, this is due to a number of different factors including changes to the child's care plan and unplanned placement moves.

- 3.12. On the 31st March 2015, 100% of LAC reviews were carried out within statutory timescales. This is an improvement on the previous year (96%). One important area of activity in ensuring that LAC reviews stay within timescales is close and effective liaison with social workers. This involves an email system to notify workers of any new children becoming looked after, any changes in circumstances and legal status and placement changes. Good face to face contact also assists this process.

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 100% 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-12	Mar-13	Mar-14	Mar-15
Number who participated in all reviews	78	82	88	87
% of LAC who participated in reviews	100%	100%	99%	100%

Method of participation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Child under 4years old	26%	17%	24%	18%
Child attends the review and is able to speak for themselves	45.3%	59%	48%	48%
Child attends and an advocate speaks for them	0%	0%	1%	1%
Child attends and conveys their views non verbally	2.7%	1%	1%	1%
Child attends but does not speak or convey their feelings	0%	1%	0%	0%
Child does not attend but asks an advocate to speak for them	6.7%	4%	5%	7%
Child does not attend but conveys their views to the review	17.3%	17%	21%	26%
Child does not attend and does not convey their views to the review	0%	0%	0%	0%

- 4.2 It is recognised for some children attending their LAC review meeting can be a daunting experience. In Bracknell Forest the IROs work hard to find imaginative ways to fulfil the full IRO function and to support children and young people to engage in the process and express their views, feelings and wishes to be heard. Some examples are:
- Arranging a separate meeting with the child in the form of a pre review meeting. This has been very successful during this review period and offers the child an opportunity to share their views with the allocated IRO and also plan ahead of the formal meeting.
 - The child being supported by a formal or informal advocate in the meeting.

- The child being supported to write a letter or draw pictures which are shared at the meeting
- The child being supported to make a DVD to show at the review meeting

4.3 The decision about the venue of a LAC review is based on the child's wishes, parental participation and safety issues. LAC reviews are held in the child's placement or at a venue that is considered appropriate such as the Family Centre or Children's Centre. This can be difficult as the availability of rooms is sometimes an issue as some buildings and facilities are not always appropriate venues for the child.

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. This way of working enables 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

"I think it is good that my IRO comes to see me before the meeting. It gives me a chance to talk to her on my own"

"My IRO knows a lot about me and helps me say what I want to say".

"My IRO rings me or texts sometimes I meet up with her but sometimes I don't need too but it is good she offers to see me"

"I can ring or text my IRO as I have her mobile number and she gets back to me quickly"

"I like my IRO she listens to me and brings things up at meetings I find difficult to say"

Case Study One – Child Participation

A 10 year old girl met with her IRO before her LAC review. She was a bit nervous as this was going to be the first formal review meeting she had attended. At their pre review meeting they talked about the things she wanted to say and agreed where they would sit so the child had good eye contact with the IRO. They also made a list of the questions the child wanted to ask at the meeting.

On the day of the meeting the child spoke again to the IRO and requested everyone attending the meeting choose something to wear from her dressing up box. This included wigs, hats, fancy sunglasses and flower garlands. This was an unusual request but everyone agreed to do so. This took away the power of the adults in the meeting and helped to make it an enjoyable experience for the child. She was able to relax and take an active role in her review meeting.

The child has since become even more active at her review meetings and co chaired the following review meeting with the IRO.

Case Study Two – Child Participation

An 8 year old child who has been looked after for one year did not want to attend the LAC review meeting. The allocated IRO respected the child's wishes but to ensure his views about the care he is receiving were heard at the meeting she visited him in his placement. She used this time to observe the child in his placement and using various tools to support her she was able to gain the child's wishes and feelings through play. The IRO has remained consistent and over time has built a good relationship with the child. She has also been able to explain to the child in an age appropriate way the reasons for the LAC review meeting and why they take place. The child is now at a point where he is confident to attend and verbally share his views.

Parental participation in LAC reviews

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

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

4.5 During the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015, a total of 172 parents (124 mothers and 48 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. Feedback from parents has been positive. One mother contacted the IRO thanking her for the support offered regarding contact issues in LAC review meeting and stated that

through receiving support from the IRO she has a better understanding of the role. A grandfather also commented on the efficiency and professionalism of the IRO/Chair.

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 remains concerned about the impact of CAMHS services in the Bracknell Forest area
- 4.7 The IROs meet with the LAC nurse every four months to discuss the wider issues relating to the health of LAC and their views about having medicals. One outcome from these meetings has been the agreement for a copy of the child's health care plan to be sent to the allocated IRO after each health assessment. The introduction of this process has supported the IRO to have a good overview of the child's health needs when preparing for a LAC review meeting.
- 4.8 Looked after children of school age have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting within 20 days of becoming LAC and then at six monthly intervals. The IRO recognises the importance of education in improving outcomes for children and young people and meets regularly with the Virtual School to ensure ongoing liaison and discussion. The IROs also have a process in place where PEP reports are sent directly to the allocated IRO to enable good preparation for the LAC review meeting.

The IRO Service acknowledges the efforts made by both CSC and the virtual school to support young people to continue in education post 18 with a number of care leavers applying to attend FE colleges and universities
- 4.9 A member of the IRO Service attends the Life Chances Team meetings and uses this opportunity to raise issues relating to individual children and also to highlight identified service deficits. Regular attendance at Life Chances meetings has supported the IRO Service to build good communication links with multi agency professionals involved in the LAC process.
- 4.10 The IRO Service has continued to work with the Child Participation Development Officer to encourage children and young people to develop skills to enable them to share their feelings and views regarding their care arrangements in positive ways during LAC review meetings and to have the support of advocates if requested. One of the tasks of the Child Participation Development Officer is to support Looked After Children in Bracknell Forest to have a say via the SILSIP Group (Say it Loud Say it Proud). Members of the IRO Service have attended SILSIP activities including 'Ready Steady Cook' sessions, the Christmas Party and activities based at John Nike Sport Centre during the summer holidays. The IRO Service sees this as a great opportunity to spend time with children and young people outside of the formal LAC review meeting.
- 4.11 This year all members of the IRO Service have taken part on the 'Do You Know' training provided by SILSIP.
- 4.12 The Youth Offending Service (YOS) is invited to the young person's LAC review meeting when they are involved. The contribution of the YOS worker in the LAC review process continues to be of a high standard which supports the LAC review process.
- 4.13. Members of the IRO service have been operating the Berkshire IRO/CAFCASS protocol and have attended the Berkshire CAFCASS liaison meetings. These meetings offer the IRO an opportunity to meet with Guardians and discuss the interface between Guardians and IROs. IROs also have contact with the Guardian on individual cases during court proceedings. Further development and commitment from all parties is required to build on this relationship to support the views of the child being heard in the court process.

5. PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Performance Monitoring

Quality Assurance of the IRO Service

- 5.1 The IRO service has continued to develop a team audit programme which quality assures aspects of the 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 and monitoring

- 5.2 The role of the IRO manager is set out in the handbook. 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.

- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 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. Children Services Chief Officer has observed a LAC review meeting and a Child Protection Conference.
- 5.5 A member of the IRO Service attends the Life Chances Team on a regular basis. This offers the IRO opportunities to work within a multi disciplinary team to support LAC children in Bracknell.
- 5.6 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.
- 5.7 The manager of the IRO Service attends legal tracking meetings which monitor progress on pre proceedings and legal proceedings and in relation to looked after children awaiting permanent placements. Following representation from the IRO service, the permanency tracking meeting considers children requiring permanence through adoption, long term fostering and special guardianship.
- 5.8 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.

- 5.9 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 quality assurance of placements and suitability of placement for a specific child. 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.
- 5.10 Team Manager supervises the IROs monthly and monitors their caseload and overall performance and training needs. Each IRO has been observed by the Team Manager and Head of Service during the last year.
- 5.11 The IRO Service had been meeting regularly with the Head of Service for LAC but due to the changeover of managers in this role, meetings have been less frequent. Now that there is a permanent Head of Service for LAC in post new meeting dates have been agreed for the coming year.

Training and Peer support

- 5.12 Members of the team have undertaken training appropriate to their needs. As a whole team we have attended legal updates training and a training session on chairing meetings. All team members attended a Child Sexual Exploitation Conference run by the Local Safeguarding Board. The Head of Performance Management and Governance has been exploring the option of jointly commissioning specialist modular training options for IROs across Berkshire as there is currently no specialist training for IROs.
- 5.13 Members of the IRO Service have attended the IRO SE regional meetings and the Berkshire IRO legal surgeries. Common themes are IROs monitoring legal status and the use of S20; Local Authorities being aware that young people know their entitlements following the DfE report on Entitlements; clear evidence of the voice of the child and Ofsted being to see the IRO footprint on the case.
- 5.14 Members of the team have met with the Head of Specialist Services to discuss the IROs undertaking return home interviews for LAC children going missing where appropriate and we have also been liaising regarding child sexual exploitation (CSE) risks for LAC children. These links with the CSE operational group are very helpful alongside notifications from social workers about LAC who go missing or are involved in significant incidents.

6 CHALLENGE AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION

- 6.1 The IRO service has been working to resolve issues informally where possible but also to embed the process for formal dispute resolution which was introduced in November 2013. It is a requirement for IROs to have a clear framework and structure in place to be able to raise issues of concern which relate to the child's carer plan and for Children's Social Care to be able to respond using a formal process.

In January 2015 we reviewed the Bracknell Forest Dispute Resolution Process and took on board the feedback from Children's Social Care about operational issues and timescales for responding. We have developed a procedural guide which clarifies the types of issues and triggers for initiating the formal process and sets out how the process will be operated and recorded.

The process allows for a number of stages to be accessed in order to resolve an issue or concern which escalates appropriately if the issue remains unresolved to the satisfaction of the IRO. The informal challenge is the very first stage of the dispute resolution and the aim is to resolve issues at this stage wherever possible.

The informal and formal disputes are recorded. Since April 2014 there have been 19 informal challenges and 11 formal disputes raised by the IRO service; two formal disputes progressed went to stage 2 and two went to stage 3. None have

progressed to stage 4 or to CAFCASS. This is an increase from 21 informal and 3 formal on 2013/14. This increase was anticipated when the process was formalised. The majority of issues are resolved informally or at stage 1 of the formal process.

Informal challenges have included:

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

Formal disputes raised have included;

- Delay in achieving legal permanency for a child
- Delay in progressing legal proceedings
- Quality Assurance of placement
- IRO in disagreement with the Care Plan due to safeguarding concerns
- Delay in provision of education following a placement change

Examples of Challenges made by the IRO Service

6.2 Informal Challenge – regarding foster care placement

An informal challenge was raised regarding the standard of care provided by Bracknell Forest carers. In the LAC review meeting it became clear the foster carers had not attended planned school meetings and other actions regarding arranging sibling contact had not been carried out within timescales.

Outcome

All the issues of concern were addressed at this early stage by the supervising social worker. Visits were made to monitor progress and arrangements put in place to ensure all school meetings were re arranged and attended by the foster carers. Arrangements for sibling contact were clarified and the foster carers were supported by the supervising social worker to support family contact.

6.3 Informal Challenge – Accommodation support.

The allocated IRO raised concerns regarding the appropriateness of accommodation for a 17 year old young woman who was pregnant. The accommodation was a considerable distance from her college placement and her family.

The IRO also had some concerns regarding the conditions of the placement and the impact of other resident's behaviour for example openly smoking illegal substances in communal areas.

Outcome

Children's Social Care acknowledged the placement was not appropriate and worked hard to identify an appropriate placement which was in line with the young person's care plan to live independently. The young person is now living independently with support from Children Social Care local to her family who are able to offer support and also close to her college which has enabled her to continue to attend to complete her course. The young person has also able to access local health services who can offer support regarding her pregnancy

6.4 **Formal Challenge – Delay in care planning**

A formal challenge was made on behalf of twin babies who were placed in foster care. The dispute process was started as an informal challenge. The allocated IRO was concerned about drift in achieving permanency for the two babies. There was no evidence of a consistent care plan and delay in completing assessments.

The IRO did not receive a satisfactory response to the informal challenge and felt the issues for the children were not resolved, so the challenge was escalated to formal stage one. The IRO felt that responses to stage one and stage two were not satisfactory and continued the process to stage three.

Outcome

The stage three response satisfied the IRO that clear timescales and actions to address the concerns had been put in place. Childrens Social Care sought legal advice and appropriate assessments were completed. The overall outcome is that the children have both returned home to be cared for by their mother and supported by the department on Child In Need Plans.

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. Listed below are some of the many examples of good practice noted:

- **The support provided by a social worker in the Specialist Support Team.**

The social worker supported a young person to actively take part in her review meeting. It was clearly evidenced in the review that the allocated social worker had spent a great deal of time preparing the young person using various tools to enable her to share her views and feelings. Photographs, drawings and pre set questions and answers were used.

- **Joint work between Social Work Team and Family Placement Team to support stability of a placement**

Whilst a young person was really struggling to manage the transition to a long term placement the Over 11's team and Family Placement team worked together to offer support. The matters raised by the young person were dealt with sensitively and her views and wishes listened to. She also received a clear explanation as to why her wishes could not be met and agreed timescales for sharing decisions and information were adhered too.

- **Positive working relationship with residential unit to provide a service for a young person.**

A young man living away from the Bracknell Forest area in a residential unit had requested an Independent Visitor. This was proving to be very difficult to arrange and after several attempts to identify an appropriate person who was able to travel or who lived locally to the young man's placement failed. The social worker and residential workers agreed that it was time to think a little more 'outside of the box' They came up with a plan for the young person to meet up with an Independent Visitor in the Bracknell area. The residential unit agreed to transport the young man each month to enable him to have access to this service.

- **Preparation for siblings to return to the care of their mother.**

The work carried out by the allocated social worker, along with colleagues in the family placement team and the virtual school to support a sibling group of two to

return to the care of their birth mother when the care order was revoked by the courts.

All parties worked with the children, foster carers and birth mother to ensure the transition back to the family home was managed sensitively and within timescales which met the needs of the children. The allocated IRO commented that throughout the process there was clear evidence that the needs and wishes of the children were considered at all stages.

- **Understanding the individual needs of the child**

The allocated IRO acknowledged the work carried out by the foster carer and the allocated social worker to support a young man to work on his self esteem issues. They were both able to acknowledge the young person's need to take some control of his life and supported him to develop his music skills. Through music this young man has become more confident and used his skills to express his feelings and emotions.

7. ISSUES IMPACTING ON THE SERVICE FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

- 7.1 The impact of the changing legal view with regard to the use of Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 has led to a review by Children Social Care of all Section 20 cases. This is impacting on the amount of court work being carried out by both social work teams but in particular has led to an increase of care proceeding being filed by the Over 11's social work team.
- 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. However the introduction of the pan Berkshire Adoption Service is welcomed and offers further opportunities to identify appropriate families able to offer children permanence through adoption. 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 The introduction of the "Staying Put" Policy has offered support to young people leaving the care system and an opportunity to remain living in their foster placement for a period of time after their 18th birthday. This is welcomed by the IRO Service but we also acknowledge the pressures this will put identifying foster placements for new LAC children and the efforts required to recruit new appropriate carers.
- 7.4 The turnover of social workers within Children's Social Care continues to be a challenge. Changes of social worker can impact on the timeliness of care planning and also on the social worker/child relationship. The IRO Service has shared the views children and young people in relation to this issue with the Senior Management Team. The IRO Service welcomes the recruitment of a permanent Head of Service for LAC and also a Team Manager. This will provide stability within the social work teams. We also acknowledge the significant efforts being made to recruit and retain staff and recognise this is a regional and national issue.
- 7.5 The workload of the IRO service has continued to be high and is affected by the number of Looked After Children living out of the area; some at a considerable distance from Bracknell Forest due to their specialist care needs.
- 7.6 A small minority of children have experienced a higher number of placement moves which has resulted in additional reviews within a six month review period. The successful introduction of the pre review meeting with the child will also continue to impact on the IRO's workload when some children live at a distance from Bracknell.

8 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The IRO Service has had a very busy and productive year. The number of children who have entered or left the care system has remained stable during the review period. Although resources have been increased and IRO caseloads have been reduced, the introduction of the pre review meetings with children and young people have resulted in additional workload for the IRO's. Having contact with children and young people between reviews however has been beneficial and as a service we would want to continue to fulfil this aspect of the IRO role.
- 8.2 The IRO service has strengthened the challenge function of the role over the last year and would seek to further embed the Dispute Resolution Process in the coming year and to be proactive in addressing delays and drift for children in care. This is clearly an expectation identified in the IRO Handbook and an element of the service which Ofsted seek to see evidence of during their Inspections.
- 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 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. We are seeking to improve consultation processes and to encourage the increased participation of parents and carers.
- 8.4 As a service we are also mindful of safeguarding issues for children in care who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, substance misuse, missing episodes and disengaging from education and training. We will continue to monitor Care Plans closely and to include actions which build safety and stability for children and young people.
- 8.5 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.

9 ACTIONS FOR 2015/16

- 9.1 As a result of completing this report and reviewing progress in the past year the IRO Service has identified the following areas for development during 2015/16.
- To fully embed the Dispute Resolution Process in order to continue to provide effective challenge where appropriate on behalf of looked after children.
 - Further development of ways to maintain contact with children and young people between reviews and monitor plans.
 - Continue to investigate the use of technology such as "Skype" or "Face time" and consultation apps to provide more accessible options for children and young people to communicate with their IRO.
 - Further developing ways to encourage the participation for parents and carers in the review process in a way that is most meaningful and appropriate to the circumstances.
 - Review the LAC review documentation and forms for recording the outcome of the LAC review. Alongside this we would recommend that Children's Social Care review of the Care Plan format for LAC to make this more child focussed.
 - Continued performance monitoring and quality assurance of the work of the team. This will include ongoing observations of practice by Team Manager and Head of Performance Management and Governance, audit and peer review processes.

Unrestricted

- Continued delivery of workshop / seminars to Social Workers and Managers to ensure the role of IRO is clearly understood and new staff have a detailed induction.
- Continue to contribute to the South East Regional IRO group and take on board national developments, legislation and guidance.
- To secure appropriate professional training and development for the IRO's to ensure their practice knowledge and skills are maintained at a high standard.