

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

Annual Report

1st April 2019 – 31st March 2020

Report for: BFSB
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Reporting to: Kogie Perumall
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TO: CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE MANAGEMENT TEAM

DATE: 31ST MARCH 2020

IRO ANNUAL REPORT
(1st April 2019 – 31st March 2020)

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

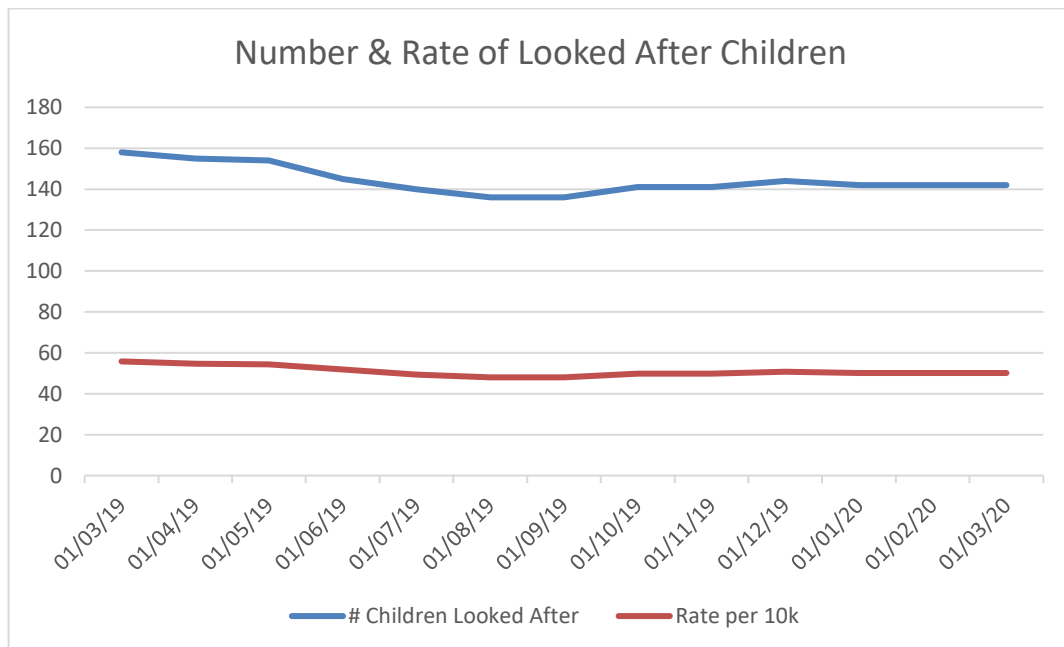
This report provides an overview of the IRO Service activity during the reporting year (1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020), based on the data for this period.

2. IRO PERFORMANCE DURING 1st April 2019 – 31st March 2020

Quantitative and Qualitative Data Analysis

2.1 Number of Looked After Children

At the end of the **2018/19** reporting year there were **158** Children Looked After. This figure decreased by the end of the **2019/20** reporting period to **142**, as illustrated in the figure below.



There was a decrease during the first half of the year. This reflected several young people becoming 18 years old, achieving permanency or returning home.

2.2 Children Looked After Demographic

The table below illustrates the demographic of Children Looked After for the last 3 reporting years. The largest cohort of children becoming Looked After has consistently been the 10 to 15 age group.

	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20
Unborn			
Under 1 - Female	4	3	1
Under 1 - Male	3	2	7
1 to 4 - Female	7	10	5
1 to 4 - Male	5	7	2
5 to 9 - Female	7	10	11
5 to 9 - Male	13	14	12
10 to 15 - Female	25	32	28
10 to 15 - Male	39	42	35
16 and over - Female	15	15	17
16 and over - Male	20	23	24
Total number of children looked after	138	158	142

When these figures are viewed in relation to gender, there were 80 males compared to 62 females at the end of the year. The predominance of males is shown in the cohorts aged 10 plus. This trend is reflected in the 2017/18, 2018/19 and in 2019/20 reporting periods. During 2019/20 the general reasons becoming Children Looked After remained the same as the previous reporting year. These include significant challenges with effective parental control, parental dysfunction, educational disengagement and/or exclusion, CSE/CE concerns (in minority of cases), historical child protection concerns and/or previous social care involvement.

2.3 Legal Status

There are considerably more children on Full Care Orders compared to those who are subject to s20 (Children Act 1989). This figure is reflective of case law and research: [2014] EWFC 775, SR (A child: Habitual Residence) [2015] EWHC 742 (Fam) regarding promoting permanency for children who become Looked After long-term with no care plan for rehabilitation to their birth family. Bracknell Forest Council does however continue to review and pursue rehabilitation plans wherever appropriate and in the interests of the child/young person.

	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20
Interim Care Orders (C1)	27	28	11
Full Care Orders (C2)	73	97	102
Placement Orders (E1)	9	7	2
Section 20 (V2)	29	26	27
Total number of children looked after	138	158	142

2.4 Adoption Activity

During reporting period three adoption orders were made for Children Looked After.

2.5 Statutory meetings (Timeliness of reviews)

	Apr - Jun (Q1)	July – Sept (Q2)	Oct – Dec (Q3)	Jan – Mar (Q4)
Total no of reviews held	88	102	87	113
No of reviews held within timescales	81.5%	93.8%	91.2%	100%

The IRO service performance in achieving timescales for statutory reviews improved throughout the year.

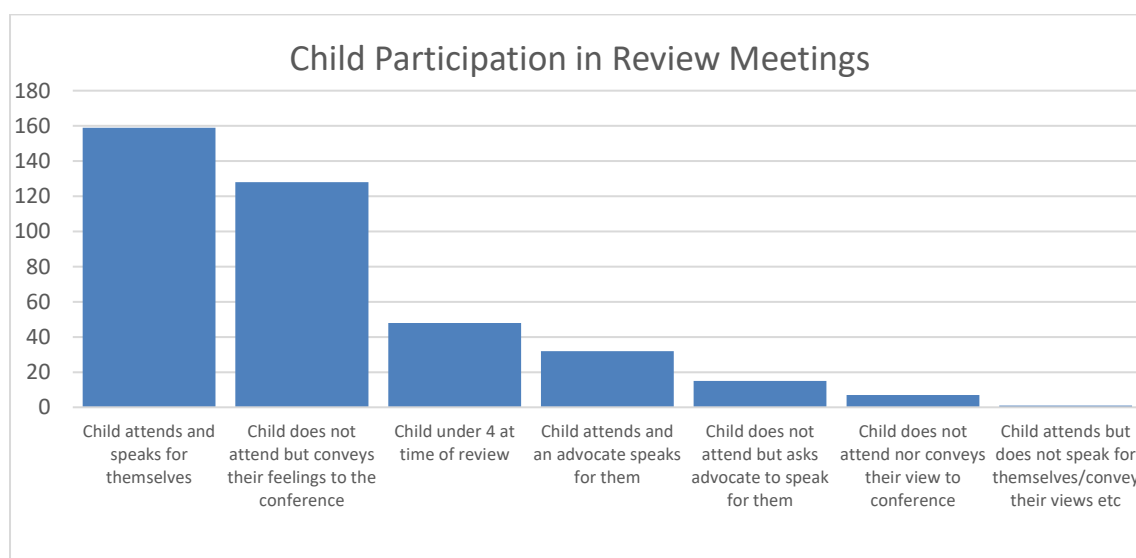
The service has reviewed causes of those reviews that miss timescales. These include; timeliness of care planning, placement moves, and professional availability (carers, educational settings /professionals).

These issues have been addressed with cooperation from CSC colleagues. It has been agreed that in future senior management scrutiny will be required for any agreement to re-schedule statutory review meetings. Themes will be addressed in forums such as the IRO service meeting. The IRO service will continued to work closely with the social work teams to ensure all CLA reviews are held within timescales.

2.6 Child Participation

By the end of reporting year 2019/20, 98% of children and young people participated in their review meeting. This is an area of strength for the IRO service. The IRO service places specific significance on children and young people’s participation in their CLA review and will continue to work with children / young people to encourage and to create opportunities for them to participate in this process.

The IRO service is in the process of exploring how to deliver consultation documents electronically, using a variety of mediums. This will be progressed in 2020/21.



2.7 Use of advocacy and Independent visitors

There was continued use of advocacy throughout 2019/20 reporting year with no significant change to figures as illustrated in the table below:

Did the young person have an Independent Advocate as part of the review?	Nos	%
Yes	50	13%
No	340	87%

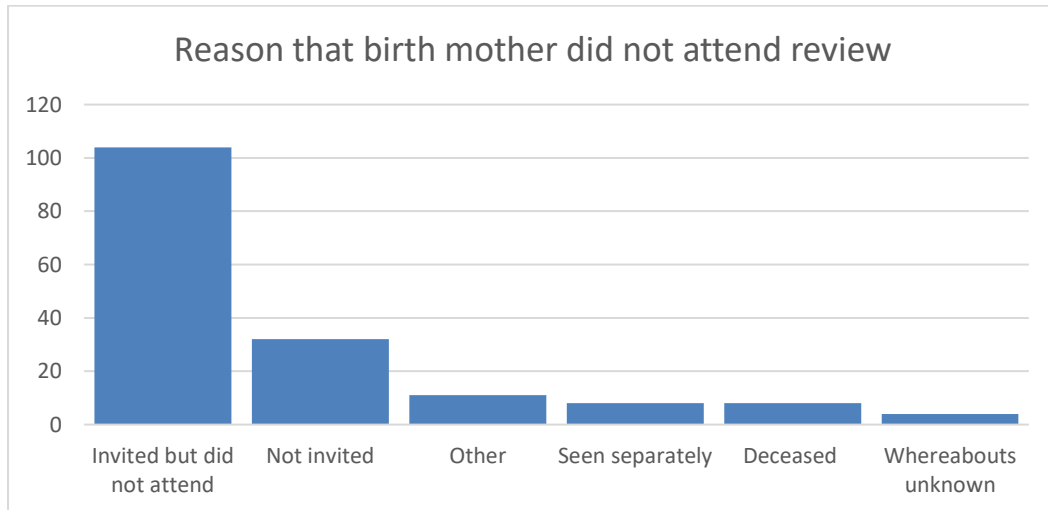
Children / young people also use other means to participate in the CLA process i.e. pre CLA visits, consultation information, carers, independent visitors.

The IRO ensures that children are always offered access to an Independent Advocate and would like every young person who cannot use other means of representation to be represented by advocates.

There are some instances, however, where young people decline to use an advocate, and prefer the IRO to represent their views. The IRO will continue to discuss this with children and young people prior to their review and represent their views as appropriate.

2.8 Parent Participation

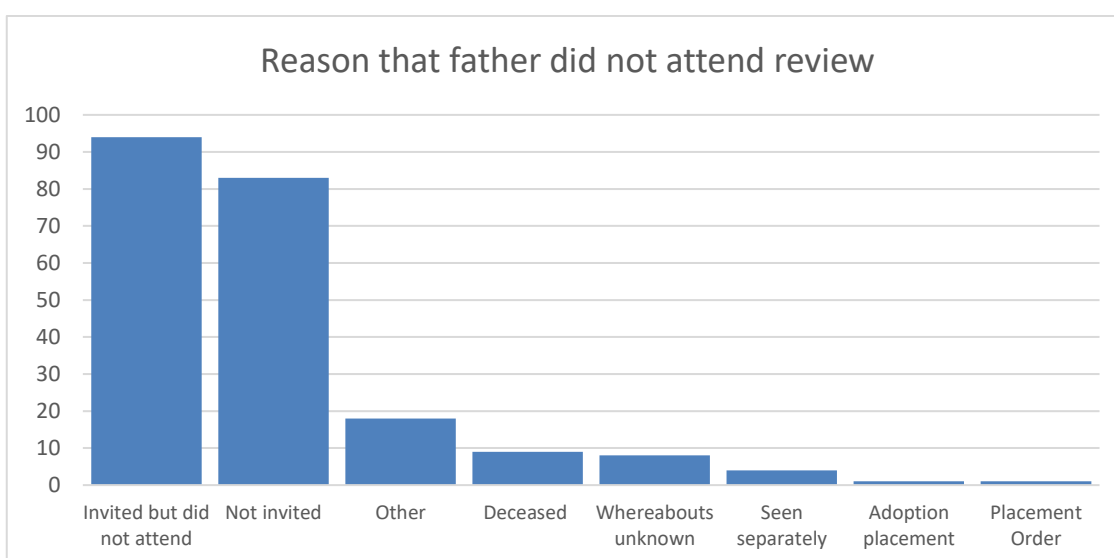
In 2019/20 reporting year 62% of birth mothers were invited to participate in the CLA review but did not attend, as illustrated below:



67% of mothers sent their views through an advocate, their child's social worker, consultation booklet, electronically or via the IRO.

How were the birth mother's views obtained? (<i>NB - there can be multiple for some reviews</i>)	Nos	%
Not obtained	109	26%
Via an Advocate/Social Worker	73	17%
Consultation booklet	26	6%
Telephone	23	5%
Seen by IRO	9	2%
Electronic communication	6	1%
Presented own views at the review	171	41%
Telephone; Via an Advocate/Social Worker	2	0%

Fathers are much less likely to be involved in CLA reviews. In the same year 43% of birth fathers were invited to participate in the CLA review, but did not attend, as illustrated below:



The IRO service has recommended this continue to be focal point for work during 2020/21. Working closely with the Child Participation Development Worker to explore tools and resource that can further encourage participation, particularly from fathers. It is also intended that birth parents are involved in developing consultation tools and resources in the future.

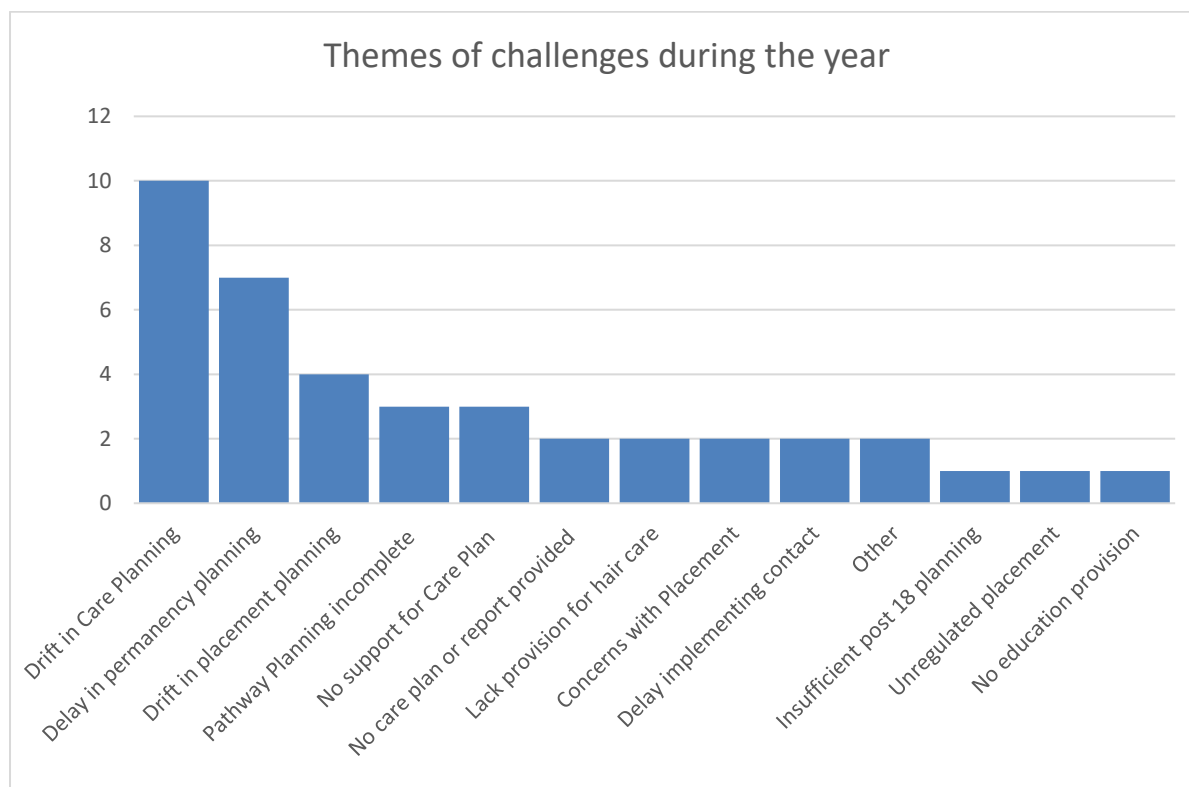
There will be continued attempts to engage parents prior to CLA reviews. The formulated letter aims at encouraging parents to engage in the process in the best way that suits them.

2.9 Escalation and Challenge

In total there were **40** challenges raised in the 2019/20 reporting period, a decrease from **2018/19** where there was **63**. The table below illustrates the numbers raised each quarter.

Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
9	16	12	3

Although the number of challenges has significantly decreased in this reporting year, the themes remain the same. The key themes are detailed as follows:



Themes are regularly discussed in IRO Service Meeting, and there are continuing endeavours made to address them. The IRO Service will continue to discuss and resolve concerns outside of the formal dispute process where it is appropriate.

2.10 Midway Monitoring

The IRO footprint is evidenced in various ways on the child's electronic file - pre CLA preparation, case note summaries, challenges and midway monitoring. Midway monitoring is completed by the IRO in between statutory reviews, where care planning progress is reviewed, and social work feedback is sought.

2.11 Complaints

There were two complaints made by a Looked After Child through the complaints process. These complaints were related to placement arrangements, care planning, sleepovers, and were responded to by the Social Care Team.

3 PROGRESS MADE IN RELATION TO RECOMMENDATIONS IN ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

The aim of key priorities for 2019/20 was to further support Children Looked After system refinements. The priorities sought to ensure a continued child-centred service that is focussed on achieving the best outcomes for children.

- a) The Independent Reviewing Officers to continue to promote and facilitate weekly drop-ins providing the forums for colleagues to ask questions and gain**

answers about Child Protection, Children Looked After processes and Parental / Child participation.

The IRO service run Drops Ins on a weekly basis to support our social care colleagues in understanding both the IRO and CP roles, as well as any new guidance or legislation.

The IROs send calendar invites to all professionals in advance of these sessions and are located in the FSM team area. The sessions were expanded to multi-agency adult social colleagues.

Feedback from those who have attended has been positive in terms of learning.

b) IRO service to continue to provide representatives for IRO Service Meeting, in order to address themes which result from challenges and progress any learning strategies / resolutions.

IRO service meetings took place during the year, covering specific themes related to IRO challenges. A number of actions were agreed between the IRO service and CLA / FSM teams in order to begin work on addressing some of the key areas of concern that have arisen from these themes.

Some specific issues arose that relate to external services and changes to the electronic records system. Whilst these are not able to be addressed immediately there are systems in place to monitor progression.

c) The IRO service to support the CLA Team with improvements to the structure and completion of pathway plans.

The Conference and Reviewing team and social care colleagues have set up a working group and held a number of meetings specifically looking at pathway planning. The final meeting during the year included representatives from FSM, CLA, C&R, Leaving Care.

Further to this meeting a timetable of working groups has been assembled incorporating the participation of Children Looked in these meetings. The aim is to enable Children Looked After to fully participate and be included in the decision making for changes in the pathway plan. Final agreements will be reached regarding the timetable for implementation of these changes during 2020.

d) IROs to continue to make attempts to engage birth parents and gain views, via pre review contact.

The IROs continue to promote pre-CLA Meeting contact with parents to gain their views and participation in the CLA process. The team has also formulated a letter to be sent to parents who do not attend meetings, again encouraging their participation.

In cooperation with the Child Participation Development worker the IRO service is proposing to introduce an electronic consultation form for children / parents who attend meetings.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The IRO service continues to play a key role in helping to ensure that care planning for Children Looked After progresses in a timely manner, including hearing the voice of the child. The IROs have continued to use the escalation process to highlight specific difficulties with care planning. They have also used informal consultations, joint managers meeting, IRO service meetings, and attendance at team meetings to highlight issues informally. The IRO service will continue to attempt to resolve matters relating to care planning outside of the escalation framework where it is appropriate and beneficial to the child.

Participation of children in their Looked After Reviews continues to be a strength for the IRO service. In partnership with the Child Participation Development Worker, IROs will continue to work on delivering consultation documents electronically through a variety of mediums. It is hoped that child centred communication tools will further encourage completion.

Bracknell Forest Children Looked After are continuing to benefit from the permanency of the IRO team, which has provided consistent relationships with children / young people through periods of change.

The IRO service is committed to continue to provide briefings and/or drop-ins to offer support and assistance to our CSC colleagues over the 2020/21 reporting period.

5 A SUMMARY OF KEY DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES DURING 2019/20

Key priorities for 2020/21 are set out below. The aim of these is to continue the progress of the service in recent years.

- a) IRO service to continue to provide representatives for IRO Service Meetings, in order to address themes that result from challenges and progress any learning strategies
- b) The IRO service to support the improvements to the structure and completion of pathway plans
- c) The Independent Reviewing Officers continue to promote and facilitate weekly drop – ins providing the forum for colleagues to ask questions and gain answers about Child Protection, Children Looked After processes and Parental / Child participation
- d) IRO service, in collaboration with the Child Participation Development worker, work on delivering consultation documents electronically through a variety of mediums
- e) Birth parents who are reluctant to engage in the CLA process continue to be a focus of engagement for IROs with consistent communication. Working closely with the Child Participation Development work to explore tools and resource that can further encourage participation particularly from fathers. It is also recommended that birth parents are involved in the development of any tools, resources which will support their engagement

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