

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report April 2015 – March 2016

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

This Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Services in East Sussex as required by statutory guidance.

The IRO Annual Report must be presented to: Corporate Parenting Board and the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

1. Purpose of service and legal context

- 1.1 The IRO service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, 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 CLA and for challenging drift and delay. One of the key tasks for IROs is to build relationships with children, young people and the professional and family network to enhance effective planning for positive outcomes.
- 1.2 The National Children's Bureau (NCB) research 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings regarding the efficacy of IRO services. The foreword written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; 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. Overview and Update

Key messages

Achievements for 15/16 included:

- The delivery of outcome focussed care plans
- Enhancing children and young people's understanding of IROs and Child Protection Advisors (CPA) roles and responsibilities
- Effective communication with operational teams
- Increased quality assurance feedback activity for locality and children looked after teams
- Continued challenge to the operational teams regarding care planning
- Implementation of new legislation for permanence

2.1 The single child's plan is now integrated into the whole system and is designed to be responsive and dynamic to the child's changing needs and environment. Since last summer the new approach to child protection conferences has been piloted across the whole service using the headings below as the central focus for the conference.

2.2

What's Working Well? (Strengths)	What are we worried about? (Risks/Needs)	What will it look like if things improve (Goal)	Who does what, by when?
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2.3 Building on this with the implementation of the new social care information system, it is also now central to the processes involving children who are looked after. The purpose is to enhance collaboration with children, parents, carers and other professionals making the plans more accessible, relevant, specific, incremental and focussed on the identified outcome.

2.4 See below for brief example:

What's working well? Strengths	What are we worried about? Risks/Needs	What will it look like when things improve? Goals	Who does what, by when?
Billy and Barney's behaviour has been calmer since being placed in foster care.	Billy and Barney have not shown any distress or emotional response after leaving their mothers care.	Billy and Barney are able to show their feelings and vulnerability, trusting that they will be comforted and listened to.	1) K and SW will do some play activities with them to help them understand about foster care and their care plans. Starting within the week.
Billy and Barney appear to be responding to boundaries and nurturing consistent care.	How their experience of not having their needs for warmth, comfort, food, education and nurture met has affected them over time.	Billy and Barney begin to see their needs as important and expect them to be met consistently and warmly.	2) K will do activities with the boys to build their self-esteem and confidence and help them to understand what is and isn't safe.

Barney is learning not to retaliate if Billy smacks him.	<p>How the changing moods and reactions to them from their parents has affected them.</p> <p>Billy and Barney can be very physically aggressive towards each other.</p> <p>Billy and Barney crave adult attention and can be over familiar with people that they don't know making them vulnerable.</p> <p>Impact of losses they have experienced siblings, parents. Barney has asked mum where her baby is.</p>	<p>Billy and Barney learn to make sense of their experiences and can take part in thinking about and talking about what the options are for their future and what they want to happen.</p>	<p>Starting immediately.</p> <p>3) SW and foster carers to consult with LAC/CAMHS to think about meeting the boys' emotional needs and whether interventions like theraplay might be helpful for Billy and Barney.</p>
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2.4 IROs update the care plan during the review to reflect progress and decisions made at the review. To manage a particularly difficult review or to enhance participation IROs have used flipchart paper and held the review in the same way as a child protection conference to good effect. There is an evaluation exercise currently underway regarding the new conference model and the outcome will inform the ongoing development of the LAC review process. So far the feedback has been very positive but it is one part of continual improvement that will be reviewed, revised and enhanced over time.

2.5 Problem resolution and escalation

- 2.5.1 One of the pivotal roles of the IRO/CPA is to raise issues affecting a child's care where, for example, performance issues, care planning and resources are affecting the child or young person's progress. IROs will always discuss issues with the social worker or their manager but if there is no resolution there is a formal process known as a Dispute Resolution Process whereby the issue can be escalated to the attention of senior managers and ultimately the Chief Executive and Cafcass for resolution.
- 2.5.2 In previous annual reports only those issues that go into a formal dispute were detailed. These are few and many more are resolved before getting to the formal process. Although we do not at the moment maintain separate records of these, over the last year there have been at least 30 children where issues have been raised by the IRO and these have been resolved without going into a formal dispute.
- 2.5.3 Although many and varied broadly the main themes were suitability of placements, drift in care planning including planning for permanence, delay in revocation of Placement Orders, delay in issuing care proceedings, delay in completing risk assessment to inform planning, out of date recording and plans, encouraging broader look at care planning options (placement with parents for example) and encouraging timely decision making sure that children know about the things that are important to them such as school placements.

- 2.5.4 Some examples include 3 children who are placed together permanently have been asking to have this confirmed but there has been delay due to the social worker not having completed the necessary paperwork. The IRO advocated on behalf of the children and the matter was resolved. A young person's placement had broken down and the IRO advocated for an assessment of the mother to be included in the care planning and this was resolved but will need on-going review. A further example involves 2 siblings whose placement was breaking down and there were no placements available for the children to be placed together given their complex and challenging needs. Although understanding the difficulties the IRO was clear that she did not agree with this care plan. A placement was found for them together but the IRO was then once again on the brink of raising a formal dispute because there was no clear risk assessment and the placement was very near to their mother's home. An urgent risk assessment was undertaken and the placement went ahead.
- 2.5.5 There is good communication between the IROs, Practice Managers and Social Workers and as well as raising issues, IROs acknowledge good practice. This is also often escalated to senior managers so that it is acknowledged across the service. Examples of these include praise for effective direct work with a child, speedy and timely decision making, managing changes for a child smoothly and passing on children's feedback. An example of this is two young people who spoke about their foster carers in the review, one saying that the best thing about his foster home was "his opinion always counts" and the other child said "they are the most loving and caring people in the world".
- 2.5.6 Over the last year there have been 2 formal challenges using the Dispute Resolution Procedures.
- 2.5.7 One involved a young person with very challenging behaviour whose placement ended suddenly due to the unexpected death of one of the carers. There was evidence that his placement was struggling to meet his complex needs and there was a delay in an assessment of this placement. Consequently a dispute was raised to challenge the delay in the assessment. This was escalated to senior managers. The assessment was completed and the young person's placement was changed.
- 2.5.8 The other was where there was drift in care planning for a child who was voluntarily accommodated. The IRO initiated a dispute and raised this with senior managers. Proceedings were initiated and there is now a clear plan for the child.
- 2.5.9 The dispute resolution process is currently under review to change the focus to 'issues resolution' whilst maintaining the focus on the professional challenge. This is due to go for wider consultation.

2.6 New legislation

- 2.6.1 Reflecting the views of children and young people who are securely settled in permanent placements the law changed this year to reduce the levels of Children's Services intervention in their lives. Specifically this means potentially having one review meeting a year. Where cases are reviewed on an annual basis there will be a paper review that the IRO undertakes by consultation every 6 months. Also social work visits to CLA where annual reviews are agreed can reduce to a minimum of 6 monthly instead of 3 monthly.
- 2.6.2 These arrangements are agreed by IROs at a review having been authorised by CLA services and are specifically for children who have been in a permanent placement for 1 year. This is currently being trialled with an identified list of potential children and will be evaluated in the autumn.

2.7 Contact cards for children

- 2.7.1 The idea of having an introductions card with the contact details of the IRO and a brief explanation of their role for children and young people to have when they are first accommodated changed into a card with the contact details of the social worker as well as the IRO and this is currently being finalised by the Children in Care Council.

3 Quantitative information about the IRO/CPA service

**1,229 CLA review meetings were held in the year up to 18th February, 2016
(Compared with 1688 in 12/13 and 1530 in 13/14 and 1232 in 14/15)**

- 3.1 Although THRIVE programme is no longer in place the targets for the year remained.

As at 31 st March 2015	Thrive target	Actual figures
CP	502	469
LAC	522	548
31 st March 2016	Target	
CP	469	459 (18.2.16)
LAC	522	548 (18.2.16)

- 3.2 CLA numbers have been stable over the year ending last year on 548 and on the 18.2.16 they were also 548. However the trend of numbers reducing has continued and at the time of writing they are below 540 but they are still above the target set of 522.

- 3.3 There are minor differences in the profile of the children as at the 18.2.16.

31.3.15	18.2.16
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 41% female 59% male 15% BME 6% have a disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 42% female 58 % male 14% BME 7.5% involved with disability teams

- 3.4 A closer look at the figures indicates that there are marginally more children 52% who are 11 and under and within this group 55% are male. Consequently the differential in this cohort is significantly lower than the 12 and over group with 62% male and a differential of 24%.

- 3.5 The analysis of our CLA population who are BME is complex and should also take into account areas

of deprivation. The numbers of children in East Sussex are relatively small but the highest cohort of CLA are white any other background (19 children). We know that in the community as a whole this is also the highest cohort and out of this group the majority are Polish (according to schools information so therefore only reflects school age children). However this does not appear to be reflected in the CLA group where there are 4 children of Polish heritage representing 21% of this group. Ofsted has recently published national information about the personal characteristics, including age, gender and ethnicity, of all children looked after on 31 March 2015 as well as details of the child's placement, including the type of placement, and location.

- 3.6 In terms of pressures within East Sussex the numbers for children aged between 10 and 17 is the same as the national picture of 60% and within that group the highest numbers of children who are looked after are aged between 15 and 17. Much can be written about the complexities of working with these young people but the review process provides a forum for the young person and agencies to come together to consider their needs and develop personal plans.
- 3.7 Another key finding of the Ofsted report was that CLA from Ethnic Minorities were more likely to be placed in an area with higher levels of crime. Areas with higher levels of crime had 38% of BME children living within them and 25% of White children. The opposite is true in ES but the numbers are so low that it is difficult to draw conclusions. As at 31st March 2015, 5.1% of CLA from Ethnic Minorities were placed in areas with the most crime (top 25%), compared to 12.4% of White British CLA. As at 31st March 2016, 7.7% of CLA from Ethnic Minorities were placed in areas with the most crime (top 25%), compared to 13.0% of White British CLA. There will be further analysis and consideration of the issues affecting CLA in East Sussex over the coming year.

4 Children's Participation

- 4.1 Encouraging children and young people to take part in their reviews begins at an early age in recognition of the importance of this to his or her self-esteem and self-efficacy and the consequent impact on good outcomes. Ways of engaging children are many, varied and highly individual and we try to measure this in a number of ways.
- 4.2 Some national standard measures for children are reported quarterly to the Department of Education. Our target figure for children's participation in their review for the year is 95%. This is consistently exceeded and this year was higher again than last year at 98.5% compared with 98.2% in 14/15, 95.4% in 13/14 and 96.9% in 12/13. (NB however our figures for this year only go up to the middle of February due to a reporting issue following the implementation of the new recording system in February 2016)
- 4.3 There was an increase in children and young people attending their reviews, over half, 51.8% compared with 49.1% in 14/15.
- 4.4 14 children did not participate at all in their reviews. The majority of these were children who were not of an age or understanding to contribute to the review or because it was so complex and there were so many other people speaking to them it was not appropriate to include them on that occasion. The remaining 4 were young people aged 16 & 17 who were either due to attend but did not do so on the day or who are clear that they did not want to attend.

5 What children and young people have been saying to their IRO/CPA

A young care leaver who is now 22 got in touch with his IRO (who had not seen him for 4 years) asking to meet for coffee, so he could let him know "how well he was doing". They arranged to meet at the local Costa Coffee shop (other coffee shops are available) and he was very proud to tell him that he was now living independently in his own flat and was working as a care assistant in a residential unit for adults with learning difficulties. He said he wasn't sure if he would have been able to achieve all this without the consistent support and encouragement that the IRO had given him during LAC Reviews whilst he was being looked after and he had remembered what the IRO had told him about believing in himself and always doing his best. He felt the IRO had been the most consistent person in his life (apart from his foster carers) for the five years he was looked after until he was eighteen.

A young person thanked their IRO for suggesting life story work as it had been very helpful.

A girl wrote to her IRO thanking her for asking her questions (consultation for Lac review) as sometimes they make her feel safe.

Another rang to ask the IRO to help them with a complaint which they duly did and the outcome was positive.

A young person rang their IRO to ask who their social worker was because they had been transferred to another team and didn't know who they were.

6. Qualitative information about the IRO service

6.1 Late reviews

- 6.2. Services for CLA are highly regulated with specific timescales for reviews. The unit work hard to achieve this so that children's plans can be considered in a timely way. Over the last year we have developed new practice guidance for managing timescales when reviews are adjourned or held as a series of meetings. Due to the way these have previously been recorded, in the short term this resulted in a small increase in reviews regarded as late. Unfortunately due to reporting issues following the implementation of the new recording system we do not have absolutely accurate data but there were 6 late reviews reported which is the same figure as in the previous year.
- 6.3 The majority of these were due to meetings needing to be adjourned due to key people not being present or where the team was not notified of a placement within timescales. One was a couple of days late because it was out of area, the young person had a number of other meetings and key professionals who were important to the child and to care planning were only able to make it on that day.

6.4 Permanence Outcomes

- 6.4.1 A central function of the IRO role is to ensure timely planning for outcomes for permanence for children and to challenge any drift. IROs liaise closely with Children's Guardians when there are care proceedings and contribute their views to the final care plan.
- 6.4.2. A permanence plan should be discussed and agreed at the second review. Looking at children under 12 only, 12% did not have a permanence plan agreed by the 2nd review. This amounted to 10 children and most were situations where there was new information or a new event to consider thus causing reasonable delay but no significant drift. However for 3 children the issue of permanency was not addressed as robustly by the IRO and there was some drift but this has now been addressed.

6.5 Children who put themselves at risk

- 6.5.1 As part of monitoring services for children who are at risk from, for example, child sexual exploitation, IRO/CPAs record whether a child is identified as at risk and whether agencies are working together effectively to reduce that risk. IROs assessed 124 children and young people as being at high risk. For 7 of these young people the IROs did not judge that agencies were working together sufficiently to address the risks. IRO/CPAs follow this up on an individual basis with the relevant teams.
- 6.5.2 Four of these children were part of the group mentioned earlier of children where issues were resolved without recourse to formal dispute procedures. One young woman is vulnerable to child sexual exploitation and has recently been placed in a secure unit. Another was a young man who was putting himself at physical risk at work.
- 6.5.3 The final one of these 7 is a young man who is experiencing considerable delay in the resolution of a criminal investigation involving an alleged sexual assault. This has been going on for over 6 months and it is preventing effective planning for him. IROs have raised the issue of children and young people waiting for the resolution of police proceedings with senior managers because it has such a significant impact on young people and their ability to progress in their lives including with education, placements and becoming independent.

7. Professional Profile of the IRO and CPA Service

- 7.1 The IRO service sits within the Performance and Planning Directorate of Children's Services and is managed by the Head of Safeguarding, Douglas Sinclair, and two operations managers, Sue McGlynn and Alex Sutton who have the leads for the IRO and Child Protection Adviser (CPA) role in Child Protection and LAC respectively. When the unit was created, chairing Child Protection Conferences (CPC) and LAC reviews were separate specialisms. These two roles are further separated by the different legislation and regulatory protocols underpinning them. Although in the main the roles are no longer separated the names have stuck and chairs have been referred to within this report as IRO/CPA.
- 7.2 The IRO/CPA team is currently made up of 9.6 fte staff at Practice Manager level (LMG2). This equates to 10 IRO/CPAs, 8 working full time and 2 part time. In order to manage the day to day demands of the service across the year the Unit has at times required the services of two part time independent consultants.
- 7.3 This reduction in numbers for children subject to Child Protection plans has had a significant impact on IRO/CPA's caseloads and with the advent of the new caseload weighting system IRO/CPA's are seeing their workloads reducing and the average of 90 cases was sustained throughout the year, although this number is still above the national recommendations of the IRO Handbook of between 50 and 70 cases.
- 7.4 IRO/CPAs undertake a number of different activities:
- 6.6 IRO/CPAs chair CP Conferences as well as CLA reviews
 - 3 IROs chair CLA reviews
 - IRO/CPAs also see and quality assure all referrals for a conference on a duty basis
 - 1 IRO has specialist lead for children with disabilities
 - 2 IRO/CPAs lead LSCB training
 - 1 IRO/CPA is part of the Young People's Participation Group
 - 1 IRO/CPA chairs PREVENT meetings
 - 2 IRO/CPAs led the implementation of the new Conference Model.
- 7.5 Amanda Glover, Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), is also part of the unit and has responsibility for managing allegations against people who work, care or volunteer with children. Operations Managers Sue McGlynn and Alex Sutton act as LADO when Amanda is on leave.

8. Conclusion and actions for the year ahead

- 8.1 An inescapable pressure over the past year has been the impact of the financial savings that need to be made by the council. Promoting stability for children and young people whose lives have been characterised by instability and abuse so that they can be safe, flourish and realise their potential is a complex challenge to the skills and resources of the service as a whole. During this time of financial pressure, delivering any changes safely for children and young people will draw on the need for teamwork between children, social workers, IRO/CPAs and colleagues in health and education. The effectiveness of this relies on the continuation of good communication and IRO/CPAs raising issues, where necessary, in a timely way. The IRO/CPAs are ideally placed to have eyes over the wider system and to identify any emerging concerns at an early stage to assist in keeping children safe.

Key messages

Improvement activities for the year ahead:

- Half day workshops and audits focussed on Mental Health; Care Leavers; diversity needs; sibling contact
- Improved quality of outcome focussed care plans
- Review progress of implementation of new procedures for Annual reviews
- Develop new Dispute Resolution procedure
- Consideration to how the IRO role may function within proposed innovations bid to central government in developing our work with adolescents