

## **Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report April 2016 – March 2017**

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

### **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 Children Looked After (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 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. Key messages

### Achievements and challenges for 16/17 included:

- 3 half day workshops and audits focussed on Care Leavers, diversity and ethnicity and Voluntary Section 20 placements.
- Continued monitoring of Placement Orders and Placement with Parents.
- Development of new Issues Resolution procedure.
- Working together to improve the consistency and quality of pathway planning for care leavers.
- Improving the quality of outcome focussed care plans and using new data base.
- Increased quality assurance feedback activity for locality and children looked after teams.
- Continued challenge to the operational teams regarding care planning.
- Rising numbers of CLA and CP, decreasing staff numbers and pressure on operational resources.
- Long term professional relationships ending as young people turn 18.

## 3. Thematic Audit Feedback

3.1 IRO/CPA's and managers undertook three half day audits focussing on children accommodated voluntarily (Section 20); Diversity and Pathway Plans.

### 3.2 Care Plans and Pathway Plans - *Embedding new ways of working*

3.3 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. It is central to the IRO role and review process and has been the focus of audit and improvement over the last year, with a particular focus on pathway plans for young people over 16 who are preparing for independence.

3.4 The purpose of the new plans 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 and the audit process has been measuring to this standard.

3.5 IROs have contributed to the improvement plan by auditing files with a subsequent report presented to senior managers, feeding back any issues to the relevant Operational Managers. This work is ongoing as new ways of working are embedded into the culture and practice of the service. The outcome of raising the profile of the plans and the joint work between the services has led to further training regarding pathway planning, using the new database and employing a temporary consultant to the Through Care Team. This cohort has also been the subject of audit across all levels of the service regularly across the year.

3.6 The new system has also presented challenges to the IROs who have changed their practice in recording the reviews. IROs support and training needs in this area continue to be further developed and reviewed.

### 3.7 Ethnicity and Diversity - *Understanding the child's lived experience*

3.8 East Sussex is predominantly White British and an audit was completed to ensure the needs of the small cohort of black and minority ethnic children and young people are understood and addressed. Whilst statistical information is useful and important it is limited and so it is also important to be confident that children and young people are able to talk to

those close to them about their religious faith/belief, sexuality, gender identity and/or any other feelings of being different. This means also understanding the messages that they are getting from their environment. This is also an area identified by Ofsted in the last inspection as in need of improvement.

3.9 IRO/CPAs undertook a thematic audit of 29 (38%) of CLA who are from different minority ethnic backgrounds. The first section of the audit focussed on recorded factual information and the second on the child's lived experience. Some of the questions were deliberately speculative to stimulate thinking about seeking and recording more textured information. The hypothesis was that the information gathering and understanding of the needs of children and young people from ethnic minorities is inconsistent and general in nature.

3.10 Key findings:

- There were some examples of detailed consideration of needs but overall Information was generic, impersonal, at times inaccurate and confused.
- The environment of children and young people is not routinely explored or recorded so did not inform an understanding of their lived experience and therefore potential needs or relevant services.

3.11 Recommendations taken forward were as follows:

- Social Workers should be informed of opportunities offered by the new database and encouraged to record in more detail and always check out accuracy.
- Information about the environment including ethnic population of the school, knowledge about relevant support groups should be sought and recorded in the Care Plan part 1 and inform assessments.
- Greater specificity of recording of religion will enhance assessment and planning.

3.12 These findings were shared with the Looked After Children Teams and the equalities team who as a result formulated some systems and practice guidance for social workers to use.

3.13 **Children accommodated voluntarily - *Consent and drift***

3.14 East Sussex revised the practice guidance regarding children who become looked after voluntarily with the parents' consent (Section 20, Children Act 1989) to enhance the timeliness of planning for these children. The aim of this small scale audit was to measure compliance with the new guidance and the hypothesis was that these children will have up to date consent, the parent continues to understand his or her rights and is consulted as appropriate, there is a clear plan for the child to return home and the need for accommodation is reviewed.

3.15 Key findings:

- Out of the eleven audited only one did not have consent
- It was not always easy to find senior manager signed agreement on the system
- Nine had a clear plan, 2 did not.

## 4. Problem resolution and escalation

- 4.1 A pivotal role 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 formerly as a Dispute Resolution Process whereby the issue can be escalated to the attention of senior managers and ultimately the Chief Executive and externally to Cafcass for resolution.
- 4.2 The newly named Issues Resolution Process shifts the emphasis to reflect what happens in practice in building on the good relationships and collaborative approach at the earliest opportunity to resolve problems and differences.
- 4.3 IROs continue to advocate for timely planning and intervention for children and young people. Examples include:
- scrutinising the status and progress of plans for a number of children who are placed voluntarily (Section 20);
  - delay in agreeing resources for a Special Guardian Order (SGO) plan for a child;
  - delay in interventions and planning for timely contact;
  - scrutinising assessments;
  - chasing up the timely initiation and completion of statutory duties.
- 4.4 Specific examples include two young people who have been out of school for a considerable time. The two respective IROs involved have worked collaboratively with the social work teams and the Virtual School over many months to get these young people into school.
- 4.5 Over the last year there have been 2 formal challenges using the Issues Resolution Process. One involved a change in services for a young person with disabilities where his care plan of short breaks was affected by the pressure on the short breaks resources. The outcome of this was to raise the profile of the potential problem with the pressure on the resource but also to prompt an updating assessment of his care plan that concluded this needed to change anyway.
- 4.6 The second was the unplanned return of a child to his mother's care and the need for timely assessments and intervention. Support was put in place quickly and this has been resolved but remains a vulnerable arrangement.
- 4.7 IROs also raised concerns with senior managers about the impact of delay in the police service completing criminal investigations, length of time for Criminal Prosecution Service (CPS) decision making and timing of court hearings; on young people's emotional health as well as on planning, for their education for example. Some of these involved children, both alleged victim and perpetrators, waiting for up to a year before these were resolved.
- 4.8 Good practice is also recognised and often escalated to senior managers so that it is acknowledged across the service. Examples of these include alerting senior managers to a young person who said of her social worker, "she was really kind and good at explaining things" and that she was "brilliant". The excellent qualities of a child friendly care plan were highlighted (see the feedback on the following page for two social workers' relationship based practice).

## Feedback 1

*“At H’s LAC review I was impressed to see and hear the easy relationship D (social worker) has built with H over a relatively, short and traumatic period of time. I am highlighting this as this young man can be so anxious he actually took his GCSE’s at home. He had his previous social worker for a number of years and the change of SW at the end of August 2016 was daunting. H was also seriously ill end November/ December 2016 - he was in intensive care – had a heart attack. He also suffers PTSD.”*

## Feedback 2

*“I just wanted to highlight the excellent SW intervention in this case. As you know it has been a rocky road but M’s thoughtfully planned intervention has in my view been pivotal in helping K turn the corner. K is currently accepting all interventions - I know things can change again but think this high standard of social work should be applauded.”*

## 5. Children and Young people leaving care

- 5.1 Children and young people leave care for a variety of reasons but the majority are either placed permanently under relevant legislation including adoption or they turn eighteen.
- 5.2 It is well documented in research that one of the most consistent professional relationships with a young person is with the IRO. Currently 31% of our CLA are aged between 15 and 17 and most of these young people have had the same IRO for many years. Over the last year and in the coming years, IROs are saying goodbye to many young people they have known for a long time. There is a plan in the year ahead to look in more detail at these young people collectively as an IRO group and consider any feedback they have given and their individual outcomes to see what insights this offers to planning and practice.
- 5.3 A few young people have given their IRO hugs goodbye and have wanted to mark the ending in some way and IROs remember the following comments from two young people.

One felt “he would have benefited from a move to the Through Care Team at 14 years”.

And the other one said that he would always remember the paper planes the IRO made for him to help him feel more relaxed during his reviews when he was younger.

## 6. Quantitative information about the IRO/CPA service

**1,529 CLA review meetings for 684 children  
were held in the year compared with:**  
**1229 in 15/16**  
**1232 in 14/15**  
**1530 in 13/14**  
**1688 in 12/13**

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

As at 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2015	Thrive target	Actual figures
CP	502	469
LAC	522	548
<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2016</b>	Target	
CP	469	459 (18.2.16)
LAC	522	548 (18.2.16)
<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2017</b>	522	563

6.2 CLA numbers have risen steadily over the year ending on 563 and well above the target of 522 reversing the trend of previous years as more children and young people are being accommodated than leaving.

6.3 The table below indicates the gap between male and female CLA narrowed slightly last year and numbers of BME children and young people have increased.

31.3.17	18.2.16	31.3.15
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 44% Female</li> <li>• 56% Male</li> <li>• 16% BME</li> <li>• 7% involved with disability teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 42% Female</li> <li>• 58 % Male</li> <li>• 14% BME</li> <li>• 7.5% involved with disability teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 41% Female</li> <li>• 59% Male</li> <li>• 15% BME</li> <li>• 6% involved with disability teams</li> </ul>

6.4 A closer look at the figures show that 31% of CLA are aged between 15 and 17 and 62% of this cohort are male.



6.5 Numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people have increased following the introduction of the dispersal scheme and account for 4.5% of the CLA population. Many of these young people are placed out of the county and in specialist residential placements in London. Two IROs have taken responsibility for chairing the reviews for the young people placed in London and identifying and raising issues that affect them such as sexual health treatment and guidance and financial support which is the subject of challenge and concern and has been raised with senior managers.

## 6.6 IRO caseloads

6.7 Overall across the service referral rates have increased over the year. In tandem with the increase in the CLA numbers, children subject to child protection plans has also increased, going from 448 to 477 and have escalated steeply so far this year to currently 551. However staffing in the unit has decreased in line with savings plans and this has consequently resulted in IROs and CPAs having caseloads in excess of 100 again. In East Sussex, IRO/CPAs have always carried higher than average caseloads compared with both their colleagues in other authorities and the DfE guidance 'IRO Handbook' of between 50 and 70. As with the whole of the service the increases have an impact on the pressures on IROs.

## 7 Children's Participation

7.1 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.

7.2 Our participation figures are consistently high and this year is no different. Twenty-two children and young people did not attend or contribute to their reviews. Out of these almost half were still very young and for others social workers were just beginning to build relationships with the children. In another a manager had to cover sickness absence and had not had the opportunity to meet with the children. The target for participation is 95% and the performance in this area exceeds this target given the very small number of children who do not participate (greater than 98%).



## 8. Late reviews

8.1 Services for CLA are highly regulated with specific timescales for reviews. The unit works hard to achieve this so that children's plans can be considered in a timely way, however due to the pressures on the service, the reorganisation of administrative support and the introduction of the new data base there has been an increase in the number of late reviews from 6 (0.4%) in the previous year to 17 (1%) this year. The majority of these were no longer than a week late.

8.2 The reasons vary and include errors by all those involved and also reflect the need to be responsive to events that happen in children's lives. Some young people for example had late reviews because they were part of the dispersal scheme and the handover from Kent was delayed. This is a target area for improvement this coming year.

## **9. Permanence Outcomes**

9.1 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. A permanence plan should be discussed and agreed at the second review, approximately 4 months after a child becomes looked after.

9.2 Looking only at children 12 and under, these plans were in place for 85% (78) of children in this cohort. The remaining 15% (12) who did not have a permanence plan agreed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> review reflect some of the complexities of care planning. An example is a baby who was allegedly being poisoned by his parents who are denying this. The evidence had to be tested in a Fact Finding hearing to seek a determination; however the parents are now appealing the outcome of this hearing so it has not been possible to identify a permanence plan. Other examples include previously agreed family placements being withdrawn unexpectedly. In one case progress has been delayed due to staffing changes in the social work team and this was followed up by the IRO.

9.3 Following the making of a Placement Order by the court where the agreed plan is adoption, IROs also monitor drift in the process of making adoptive placements in a timely way and in the revocation of the order when adoption is no longer the plan. IROs challenge any drift in this process on an individual case by case basis but also by feeding back jointly to the Operations Managers in the Safeguarding and CLA services respectively who monitor progress. In past years this has been the subject of challenge and dispute but there has been improvement this year and this has not been necessary.

## **10. Professional Profile of the IRO and CPA Service**

10.1 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.

10.2 The IRO/CPA team began the year with a complement of 9.6 full time equivalent staff at Practice Manager Level (LMG2). This equates to 10 IRO/CPAs, 8 working full time and 2 part time. In response to the reduction in CP Plans achieved during 2015/16, sustained during Quarters 1-2 2016/17, and efficiency savings required, it was agreed that the Unit would reduce by 1 IRO/CPA position at the end of November 2016 and the two Safeguarding Operations Managers would be allocated partial caseloads. An IRO/CPA took early retirement from the Local Authority after 33 years' service and this post was not replaced so the savings were made. 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.



10.3 IRO/CPAs have continued to undertake a number of different activities although this is currently constrained due to their increased caseloads:

- permanent IRO/CPAs chair CP Conferences as well as CLA reviews
- 3 IROs chair CLA reviews
- IRO/CPAs quality assure all referrals for a CP 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 IROs lead on asylum seeking children and young people.

## 11. Conclusion and actions for the year ahead

11.1 Overall the Safeguarding Unit is performing well. The achievements and challenges over the last year have been managed by the team with characteristic willingness to go the extra mile and support each other. IRO/CPAs continue to play a significant role in advocating for timely care planning and alerting the organisation to issues affecting young people on an individual and collective basis. There are clear areas presented in the report to celebrate, such as high participation rates, timely challenge to care planning and highlighting the need to develop pathway planning. There are also clear areas to improve such as building on the quality of outcome focussed plans and ensuring more reviews take place on time. In addition further challenges ahead include reducing the risks to vulnerable young people from sexual exploitation, working with families where neglect is a factor and working within an increasingly pressured environment.

### Key messages

Improvement activities for the year ahead:

- IROs will have an increased focus on monitoring and reviewing statutory requirements e.g. Initial Health Assessments and PEPs
- IROs will continue to monitor children subject to Section 20 placements to address any drift in planning
- Half day workshops and audits focussed on Diversity needs, pathway plans and sibling contact.
- Improved performance for reviews being held on time.
- Improved quality of outcome focussed care plans
- Reduced IRO/CPA caseloads



Written by Alex Sutton 10.7.17



co-signed Sue McGlynn

Operations Managers  
Safeguarding Unit