

Appendix 1

IRO Annual Report 2009-2010

1 Introduction

- 1.1 An Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service for Looked After Children is required in guidance arising from The Adoption and Children Act 2002 to be presented to the Director of Children's Services, Lead member for Children and the Corporate Parenting Panel. This report contains a summary of work completed by Southwark IRO Service for the period 2009-2010.

2 Legal Context

- 2.1 Section 118 of the Adoption And Children Act 2002 introduced the statutory role of the IRO with a duty to monitor the Local authorities functions in relation to a child's Review of Care Plan and to refer a case to the Children's and Families Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) if any dispute could not be resolved within the Local Authority . The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 expanded the role of the IRO from reviewing the child's Care Plan to monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis. New regulations (Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010) have been issued and these are accompanied by 4 sets of statutory guidance including, The IRO Handbook, due to come into force in April 2011. All children in care including those on Adoption Plans or receiving short breaks are covered by these regulations.

- 2.3 The expectation is that each child will have a named IRO who will have effective independent oversight of the child's case by

- Determining and representing the child's wishes and feelings
- Ensuring their rights and interests are protected
- Assessing whether the Local Authorities Care Plan for the child meets the assessed needs of the child within the timescale of the child
- Negotiating with the social work team and managers on any identified issues arising from the Care Plan or implementation of the Care Plan and where necessary escalating unresolved concerns to an appropriate level in the Local Authority's management structure, and /or if necessary to CAFCASS. (no cases in Southwark have needed to be escalated beyond Deputy Director level)

- 2.4 The main forum through which the IRO carries out their monitoring role is the Statutory Review. These take place regularly at the following times

- First Review within the first 28days
- Second Review within 90 days
- Subsequent Reviews at 180 day intervals
- When a child or IRO asks for one
- When significant events occur

- 2.5 The review should wherever possible take place at the child's placement. Parents, carers and their support workers, social worker and the IRO are the expected attendees. Reports from other professionals such as Health, Education and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are also received. For some cases, it may be necessary to hold a series of meetings to facilitate all professionals and views to be heard and where a child does not want to meet with some persons including their parents.
- 2.6 The role of the IRO is presently under review by the Government. The Munro Review and the Family Justice Review will be reporting in Spring 2011. Options being considered include
- Leaving the role as is
 - Streamlining the role reducing duties
 - Outsourcing the role to an organisation outside of the Local Authority to increase independence and effectiveness
 - Amalgamating the role with that of the Children's Guardian during Care Proceedings as there is an overlap in these roles.

3. The Southwark Context

- 3.1 In mid 2009, Southwark was estimated to have a population of 285,600. There is a high proportion of young people, with 61,400 children and young people aged between 0–19 years (21.5%). There are around 24,200 children under 5 years (8.5 %). This is higher than the National proportion of under 5's (6.1 per cent).
- 3.2 Southwark is a diverse borough with over 181 languages spoken in its schools (January 2008). The largest ethnic minority group is black African (mainly Nigerian and West African) which accounts for around 15.6% of the whole population. In 2007 it was estimated that 62.1% of the population was white.
- (See 'Population in Southwark Jan 2009' on Southwark council website)
- 3.3 Southwark has relatively high numbers of looked after children compared to other London boroughs. On 24/12/10 there were 527 Children looked After in Southwark down from 557 at end of March 2010. The period 2009-2010 saw an increase of looked after children likely to be in response to media coverage of 'Baby P' and also as a consequence to the Southwark Judgement which required Local authorities to bring homeless 16 and 17 year olds into care.
- 3.4 The make up of Southwark Looked After children population was as follows on 24/12/10:

CLA by Age & Gender	Female	Male	Total
0-4	46	55	91
5-9	34	47	81
10-14	51	90	141
15-17	85	119	204

Total	216	311	527

CLA Specialist group	Female	Male	Total
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children	7	14	21
Children with Disabilities	10	14	24

Ethnicity breakdown was as follows:

CLA by Gender & Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total	%
Asian - Bangladeshi	3	1	4	0.8%
Asian - Other	2	18	20	3.8%
Asian - Pakistani	2	2	4	0.8%
Black African	48	55	103	19.5%
Black Caribbean	24	42	66	12.5%
Black Other	25	32	57	10.8%
Information not yet obtained	1	1	2	0.4%
Other	5	13	18	3.4%
Other Mixed	7	21	28	5.3%
White & Asian	1	1	2	0.4%
White & Black African	4	3	7	1.3%
White & Black Caribbean	24	20	44	8.3%
White British	60	88	148	28.1%
White Irish	2	3	5	0.9%
White - Other	8	11	19	3.6%
Total	216	311	527	100

It will be noted that Southwark has an over-representation of black and dual heritage children in care. On 24/12/10 only 32.6% of the care population were described as white. This reflects a similar position to most other London boroughs.

Meeting the identity needs of such a diverse population of looked after children in terms of race, culture, religion, language and special needs is an ongoing challenge for services.

3.5 Key Challenges for Southwark Looked after Children Services

Key challenges for Southwark Looked after Children Services reflect many of the challenges faced by other Local Authorities and inner city areas.

- Fluctuating care population due to response to media coverage (e.g. Baby P); 16 and 17 year old young people seeking accommodation under the Southwark Judgement; increased use of care by courts and police and families as a means to protecting young people involved in gangs and crime. The latter two categories of young people requiring care now vie for scarce resources including placements from younger children and families raising the question as to whether the care system is the most appropriate response to their situation and needs.
- Supporting young people in care who have gang associations. Finding solutions to divert or protect looked after young people from dangerous activities.
- There have been difficulties recruiting and retaining experienced social workers which in the past has resulted in frequent changes of worker for children and delays in care planning actions being completed. However, Southwark's workforce is generally stable and turnover rates have reduced. Decreased budgets will mean that the service will have to organise itself so that it can reduce bureaucracy and free up social work time.
- Complex electronic systems with strict requirements for recording and data inputting resulting in added bureaucracy for workers and less time for face to face work. These matters are being addressed in the Munro review of social work.
- Slow court systems and understaffed Guardian workforce delaying permanence planning for children
- Identifying sufficient placements appropriate for the diverse needs of children and young people in a competitive market place and within a decreasing budget.
- Research and updated guidance stresses the benefits of continued foster care and support post 18 for many looked after children to improve their outcomes in adult life e.g. those in education or very vulnerable young people who do not quite meet criteria for adult mental health or disability services and struggle with independence. The Government has not provided any additional funding. This places greater pressure on an already limited pool of foster placements and other resources.
- Restructuring of Departments and the way we work may be needed following budget reductions and recommendations from the Munro and Family Justice Review in 2011. Managing such major changes and workers morale will be challenging.

4 **Southwark IRO Service**

- 4.1 The Southwark IRO Service is situated within the Quality Assurance and Improving Social Work Business Unit. The Business Unit Manager reports directly to the Deputy Director making IROs independent of children's cases operational management

structure where allocation of resources lies. The team is based at Council's Head Office at 160 Tooley Street.

- 4.2 In addition to the core function of monitoring a child's care plan, the IRO Service is also involved in a number of other meetings on individual cases, in wider consultations and planning forums where policy and procedures are developed e.g. Health, Education, Participation and Professional Standards groups, audit work, training and liaison with Teams and other services e.g. , complaints and commissioning . IROs regularly feed into or undertake development of policies and procedures e.g. participation of parents, allegations against carers. They also highlight good practice as well as feeding back evidence of poor practice, poor standards of placements or safeguarding issues.
- 4.3 The IRO service consists of 8 full time equivalent IROs and a manager. Administrative support is provided by two full time administrative staff managed by the QAU Admin Manager. A ninth post of IRO was previously funded to review Unaccompanied asylum seeking children , as necessitated by the Hillingdon Judgement, but this funding and post is already deleted as the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking young people have decreased considerably.
- 4.4 Actual staffing in 2009-2010 consisted of
- 4 directly employed permanent staff making up 3 full time posts
 - 10 freelance self employed sessional workers making up 5 full time equivalent posts. These have varying caseloads between 15-70 children who are looked after.
 - Of the 14 workers 2 are male, 12 female; 2 are black and 12 are white.
- 4.5 The team make up is the same as for 2008-2009 indicating good retention of staff but more importantly consistency for children. 11 of our IROs have been working for Southwark for between 3 and 9 years. Children often have different social workers as they move through the care system from referral to 0-12 teams to 13 + teams or as a result of social workers moving. IROS therefore may be the worker to provide the continuity, being able to inform new workers or carers of the child's history, let them know what has worked well in the past and what hasn't. They can talk to the child about their parents and family they may no longer see or about placements they used to live in.
- 4.6 A review of the IRO staffing was undertaken in 2009-2010 and concluded that a mixed economy of permanent and freelance staff provide the most effective and independent service. Until such time as the future of the IRO service will be known in 2011 there will be no further recruitment of permanent staff outside of the present Southwark workforce. Any staff leaving will be replaced with freelance workers.

5 Performance

- 5.1 the IRO team provides an efficient service, always within budget. During 2009-2010 it chaired and completed reports for 1571 reviews of children looked after as well as making representations and undertaking other tasks, giving a cost of approximately

£350 per review including professional, administrative, and management costs. These reports once signed off by the Team Managers are the child's Care Plan. Since fully taking over the review function from teams during the year 2005- 2006 the service has increased performance for the timeliness of reviews and the participation of looked after children and young people and improved the overall quality and independence of the review process.

5.2 The IRO service therefore makes an important contribution to good performance against key performance indicators in the National Indicator Set: C63 (Participation at Reviews) and N166 (timeliness of Reviews). They also contribute to many other Performance Indicators through quality assurance and collection of data or raising issues on cases at appropriate levels to minimise poor outcome e.g. drift in care planning, placement stability, educational achievements etc.

5.3

Year	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2009-2009	2009-2010
Number of Reviews *	1699	1768	1579	1599	1571
N166 Reviews in timescales	88.7%	94.3%	95.7%	94.1%	92.8%
C63 Participation at Reviews	80.1%	90.8%	94.7%	95.7%	94%
No of LAC at March		633	576	533	557

The number of reviews reflects not only the core number of Looked After Population, but also different needs of cases as some will require more than others e.g. following placement breakdowns or children who spend short periods of time in care (under a year) as newly looked children after require more frequent reviewing . These include remands to Local Authority care from criminal courts; short term support for families in crisis; and teenagers looked after under the Southwark judgement. There were 278 newly looked after children in 2009-2010 most of whom returned home.

5.4 The extension of the role of the IRO to undertake ongoing monitoring and not just the review of Care Plans will increase the workload for IROs. At present in Southwark we work to an average caseload of 60 per full time equivalent, maximum of 70 which is in line with the guidance. The Government has not provided any additional funding to support the increase in requirements. Monitoring cases will be more time consuming and there is concern nationwide as to whether this is practical. As such streamlining the role is one of the options being considered. For example this may mean in practice IROs fully reviewing all newly looked after children up to the 3rd review and thereafter annually with a more restricted review taking place at the six monthly point.

5.6 The 7.2% of reviews not held within timescales in 2009-10 represents 35 out of 1571 reviews as the Performance Indicator represents numbers of children who have had all their reviews in timescales. Of the 35 reviews that were late 16 were due to late

referral to the IRO service or late entry onto the Care First electronic database; the remaining were due to capacity in covering IRO sickness ;late by just a few days as IROs had miscalculated the number of days; difficulties in making arrangements due to attendees priorities.

- 5.7 The Performance Indicator for Participation is based on number of children who had not contributed to one of their reviews in a year. So although a child may participate in 2 out of 3 reviews in a year this will not fulfil the criteria for participation. 29 children did not contribute to one of their reviews. These were due to the young person either refusing to participate or not available to participate e.g. if missing or out of the country, due to illness or other priorities to meet or communicate with the IRO within the timescales. The IRO will agree a plan with the social worker or carer to ensure the young person's views are available for the next review if they do not attend.
- 5.8 IROs spend time with children and young people prior to a review to determine their wishes and feelings, identify if they have any concerns and how they would like to participate in the meeting. If necessary or requested the IRO will ensure an advocate is provided to support the child or young person during the meeting. IROs will frequently arrange to meet children and young people at different times, ring or text them to try and gain their views when they have not attended a review meeting. Children or young people who have English as a second language will have an interpreter available. Children with Disabilities or with communication difficulties will be supported to express their views with help of their carers or a specialist worker or an advocate.
- 5.9 Distribution of reviews is not a Performance Indicator. However statutory guidance indicates reports should be circulated within 14 days. This will change in April 2011 to provision of decisions within 5 working days / 7 days and full report within 15 working days / 21 days .While there has been much progress in timeliness of reports by IROs and distribution by team there is still considerable room for further improvement.
- 5.10 Volume of work within tight timescales is the main reason for delays. The difficulties posed by the electronic case recording system also contribute. Writing reports takes more time and the difficulty in accessing the system can also cause delay.

6 Representations - What difference do IROs make?

- 6.1 IROs seek to ensure daily life for children and young people is not just good enough. They positively promote the child's self esteem, resilience and overall development through their quality assurance role. This will include: checking diets are healthy and culturally appropriate; medicals take place; foster carers attend parents evenings or read bedtime stories; and check contacts with siblings take place. IROs often identify the small things which make a big difference to a child if they get overlooked often due to time and priorities. This would include: ensuring sleepovers or school trips take place; passports are obtained so holidays are not missed with foster families; ensuring cultural and faith needs met such as a prayer mat for young people of the Muslim faith; all faith special dates are celebrated; and check carers take them on outings to the libraries or theatre and that they have regular positive extra curriculum activities .They do this often through suggestions at reviews , encouraging carers and

workers rather than formal escalation processes and so this cannot always be visibly evident or easily quantified.

- 6.2 More serious concerns relating to care planning or implementation of the Care Plan, resources or poor practice, IROs will liaise with the team, seeking to resolve informally. A record of this should be on the child's record though this was often done via email or discussion with the team and so was not very visible on the file. However an ICS record format for IROs was introduced which has assisted with tracking IRO interventions though an audit of these has not yet been undertaken.
- 6.3 When a problem cannot be resolved informally each Local Authority must have a formal 'dispute resolution' process through which an IRO can escalate their concern to the appropriate management level. In Southwark there is an Escalation Procedure. Over a period of 3 years only 20 formal escalations were raised as IROs preferred to use emails etc as Teams could be defensive about receiving these .A review of the Escalation Procedure was therefore initiated in 2009-2010 and concluded in 2010-2011 due to this underuse of the procedure. A more simplified format renamed IRO Representation is ready for implementation in April 2011 with the introduction of the IRO Handbook. IRO's will be liaising with Teams to ensure there is a common understanding of the process and its purpose.
- 6.4 In the meantime IRO's have collated a list of cases about which they have concerns of delay in Care Planning or where they have concerns about serious identified needs not being met. This list was shared with Team Managers and IROs will continue to monitor progress with the Teams.
- 6.5 Examples of IRO interventions include
- 11 year child did not want to move from her foster placement and carer wanted to keep her. Team had already put Final Care Plan into court without IRO consultation. IRO made contact with the Council's Legal Department, the Guardian and child's solicitor and had the IRO and child's views represented in Court . The decision to remove her was reversed and the child remains happy and stable with her foster carer.
 - IRO concerns about returning a baby with parents to community was escalated to the Deputy Director. Extra safeguards were put in place for supervision at home. The baby eventually returned to local authority care and is now placed for adoption.
 - IRO intervened to change Care Plan to ensure siblings stayed together and were not separated.
 - IRO intervention to ensure standard of keywork support and accommodation was raised and young person referred to Children's Rights Officer.
 - IRO intervention to return siblings to family as case drifting due to staff illness.
 - IRO continued involvement post 18 to ensure vulnerable young person is adequately supported in independent living
- 6.6 It has been difficult to obtain feedback from young people about their views on reviews and the IRO role. Previously a questionnaire was sent out at reviews but only 5 were returned by young people. For many children and young people they may not even know that the meeting they attend is called a review or the person they meet is

an IRO. They may just know them by their name – ‘the woman / man who comes to see how I am every few months’. Nor will they always know or understand the work IROs may do outside of Reviews in trying to resolve issues and get their views listened to.

6.7 Speaker Box, the Children in Care Council, is revising the Review consultation form to include a section to encourage young people to feedback how reviews and IROs could be more friendly and useful. The Office of the Children’s Rights Director is undertaking a study to identify young people’s views on Reviews and the role of the IRO to feed into the Munro Review and Family Justice Review.

6.8 Speaker Box have asked several young people however what they think of IROs and the following quotes were received

- ‘Yeah, my reviewing officer is good, he remembers things and asks questions. I meet with him to talk about my foster carer. I have known him a long time ‘ 13 year old girl
- ‘they ask for your view; that sounds simple but means a lot’
- ‘yeah , it’s good to see social workers have to give reasons for their actions at the meetings, it makes me feel I am somebody , and things are not just done to me’ 17 yr old girl
- ‘Why has no-one listened to me, it’s only when I have been at that meeting, you get what I mean. I can’t handle it at home and no-one listened when I was homeless. I know they will tell them I’ve done good at the carers and I am happy. They listen when it is official’ 16 yr old boy
- ‘Yeah thanks to them I got my school changed. It was really hell at my last school but no-one would listen’
- ‘At least they are on your side and make sure you get treated good’
- ‘I don’t remember their name but they have a good memory about stuff’ 14 yr old boy
- ‘the meetings are boring but they check up on stuff’ 16 yr old boy
- ‘they got me to stay in my placement longer’
- ‘they give you information like Speaker Box and check on your rights and complaints , some stuff is a bit long’
- ‘they are always there but my social worker always changes’

7. Audits

7.1 There have been two detailed audits of IRO activity during 2009/10. The first looked in general at the IRO’s review records and the second looked specifically at the review records for those children who were subject of Child protection plans and also looked after.

7.2 The audit of review records considered the overall integrity and consistency of the reports including the content and quality of recording. It was found that major issues of Care Planning including Permanency Planning were being reviewed satisfactorily and no children were identified who appeared to be ‘drifting’ unnecessarily in the care. In general, contingency plans were in place and plans were modified appropriately in the light of changed circumstances. While the majority of reports

were considered to be satisfactory or good, there was some variation in the quality of a few records and specific areas were identified as needing practice development.

- 7.3 The audit report drew up a number of recommendations following the audit – this included the author feeding back both to individual IRO's and to the IRO group as a whole.
- 7.4 The second audit focused on risk issues for looked after children. The audit was looking at how far the two processes of CP planning and LAC reviews were integrated. The overall finding was that the LAC Reviewing and Child Protection Conference processes tend to run more in parallel to each other rather than being integrated. Again the findings were fed back to individual IRO's and teams. A new procedure was drawn up for children subject to dual processes – which will hopefully ensure more integrated practice.
- 7.5 In addition, as a result of the audit findings, the CLA review form has now been amended to include a separate consideration of risk issues. It is hoped that this will assist IRO's to integrate these issues in more detail at future meetings.
- 7.6 IRO's have also directly participated in a number of audits undertaken by the CLA service.

8. Key successes and Priorities for the Future

8.1 Our Key successes have been

- Maintaining an experienced, committed and trained team of IROs providing consistency for children and young people.
- Achieving a high level of participation of children and young people in their reviews with IROs frequently making separate arrangements to ensure this. Also achieving a high level of reviews held within timescales.
- The standard of Review Reports is widely considered to have improved significantly since the introduction of IROs. An audit of reports reflected this and made recommendations for further improvement of report standards.
Review reports provide a pen picture of the child, synopsis of family history and a good 6 monthly summary of the case, including assessed needs and action plan .They are the Care Plan.
- Positive feedback from partner agencies such as Health, Education and CAMHS states they value having an independent professional to liaise with, giving their views weight and integrating them into Care Plans.
- Many Children's Guardians value having the IRO, an independent professional within the Local Authority to consult with.
- Advocates and complaints section often find IROs can help negotiate resolution in a quicker and smoother manner.
- IROs have given feedback to teams, commissioning and fostering service when placements are not of a satisfactory standard. They have also advocated for more placement support when necessary.
- Working with operational services to reduce delay in permanency planning and achieve better outcomes for Southwark Children Looked After. IROs will highlight

concerns identified at reviews and seek resolution mostly through informal negotiation but also using the formal escalation process when necessary.

- IROs bring to the attention of management drift or serious concerns where workers are ill or where there is poor practice

8.2 Our Key Priorities for the IRO Service are

- To ensure that all reviews take place within statutory timescales
- Improve the quality of reviews and care planning
- Improve the long-term stability of children's placements
- Work more closely with social workers and their managers to support improvements in the quality of reviews and care planning.
- Ensuring IROs and operational teams are fully up to date with the requirements of the new Regulations and guidance which are to be implemented in April 2011. Much is already good practice in Southwark. However extending the role to monitoring a child's Care Plan in between reviews is a challenge within existing resources.
- Improving timeliness of reports and distribution of reports as timescales for distribution of review decisions are decreased in the new guidance .The ICS report format is more time consuming than a word document and the frequent problems with access to ICS contributes often to delay in completion of reports within timescales.
- Working with operational teams to improve performance in alerting IROs to significant events and seeking their endorsement of any change to Care Plans not agreed at a review. This is particularly pertinent for Court Care Plans
- Improving IROs access to court documents through a more formal liaison with Legal Section.
- Improving use of IRO representations to management to resolve issues of concerns ensuring transparency of work undertaken through IRO records on ICS.
- Improving the rate of progress of Permanency plans for Adoption or Special Guardianships and Long Term Fostering to ensure our children are in their permanent family at as early an age as possible through closer working with operational teams and Adoption and Fostering .
- Ensuring adequate administrative support for team to avoid more costly professional and management time on these tasks.
- Working with Speaker Box to obtain more information from children and young people on how the review process and IRO role can be more useful for them

9. Summary

The IRO Service has continued to provide an efficient and effective provision for reviewing and monitoring the Care Plans for Looked After Children. It contributes to improved outcomes for Looked After Children through increasing participation of children and young people in the decision making about their care as well as making independent representations to social workers and Management on planning and practice issues. Communication and relationships with teams are positive with the independent scrutiny valued by social workers and management.

A review of the IRO role is being undertaken in 2010-2011 through the Munro Review and the Family Justice Review which will shape the way the service develops in the future.

3rd February 2011