

APPENDIX A

London Borough of Southwark Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2011-2012

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1. Introduction

An Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service for Looked After Children is required in accordance with guidance arising from The Adoption and Children Act 2002. The report has to be presented to the Director of Children's Services, the Lead member for Children and the Corporate Parenting Panel.

This report contains a summary of work completed by Southwark IRO Service for the period 1st April 2011 – 31st March 2012.

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 authority's functions by means of regular statutory reviews of the Care Plan of looked after children. The IRO was given the power 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.
- 2.2 The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 expanded the role of the IRO from just reviewing the child's Care Plan to monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.
- 2.3 New regulations (Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations) were issued in 2010 and these are accompanied by 4 sets of statutory guidance including the 'IRO Handbook', which came into force in April 2011. All children in care including those on Adoption Plans or receiving short breaks are now covered by these regulations.
- 2.4 A number of new procedures have been drafted as a result of the new guidance. These include primarily the new arrangements for 'Staying put' and the 'Family and friends placement guidance'.
- 2.5 Every looked after child has a named IRO who has independent oversight of the child's case including:
 - 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.
- 2.6 The main forum through which the IRO carries out their monitoring role is the Statutory Looked After Review. These take place regularly at the following times
 - First Review within the first 28 days of the child becoming looked after
 - Second Review within 90 days
 - Subsequent Reviews at 180 day intervals

- When a child or IRO asks for one
 - When significant events occur
- 2.7 The review should, wherever possible, take place at the child's placement. Parents, residential workers, foster carers and their support workers, social worker and the IRO are the expected attendees. Reports from other professionals such as Health, Education and CAMHS are also received. In some cases, it may be necessary to hold a series of meetings to facilitate all professionals and views to be heard – for example where a child does not want their parents or another professional to attend a review.
- 2.8 The role of the IRO was reviewed by the Family Justice Review which reported in November 2011. Their conclusions in connection with IROs were as follows:
- The role of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is important to local authorities and they would very likely recreate it were it removed from them. The priority should be to improve the quality of the function and ensure its effectiveness and visibility.
 - We recommend that local authorities should review the operation of their IRO service to ensure that it is effective. In particular they should ensure that they are adhering to guidance regarding case loads.
 - We recommend that the Directors of Children's Services / Directors for Social Services and Lead Member for Children receive regular reports from the IRO on the work undertaken and its outcomes. Local Safeguarding Children Boards should also consider such reports.
 - Courts would benefit from this information too alongside outcomes of care cases. The pilot recommended earlier (for courts to receive information about the outcomes for children and families on which they have adjudicated) should include information from the IRO.
 - The courts and IROs need to develop more effective links. Guardians and IROs should strengthen their working relationship.

3. The Southwark Context

- 3.1 The census data in 2011 gave Southwark a population of 288,300.
- 3.2 Southwark is an extremely 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 2010 it was estimated that 64.8% of the population was white.
- 3.3 Southwark has relatively high numbers of looked after children compared to other London boroughs. On 5/2/13 there were 568 Children Looked After in Southwark compared to 540 at end of March 2011.
- 3.4 The make up of Southwark Looked After children population was as follows on 5/2/13

CLA by Age & Gender	Female	Male	Total
0-4	67	62	129
5-9	51	60	111
10-14	52	79	131
15-18	80	117	197
Total	245	323	568

Ethnicity breakdown was as follows:

CLA by Gender & Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total	%
Total Asian	8	11	19	3%
Total Black	102	131	233	41%
Total white	80	108	188	33%
Total Other	3	13	16	3%
Total dual heritage	42	52	94	17%
Not stated/not yet obtained	10	8	18	3%
Total	245	323	568	100

Southwark has an over-representation of black and dual heritage children in care. On 5/2/13 only 33% of the care population were described as white. This reflects a similar position to most other London boroughs. The largest single ethnic group is 'White British' at 160 children (28%) and the second highest group is 'Black African' at 112 children (20%).

3.5 Key Challenges for Southwark Looked after Children Services

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

- The current financial situation means that there is reduced funding for local authorities. This has an impact of staffing and resources available for placements.
- Meeting the needs of a diverse population of looked after children in terms of race, culture, religion, language and special needs is an ongoing challenge for services.
- The need to identify sufficient placements appropriate to the diverse needs of children and young people in a competitive market place and within the context of a decreasing budget.
- Research stresses the benefit of continuing to offer foster care and support post 18 for many looked after children to improve their outcomes in adult life. This is the case for example where young people continue in education post 18. In addition some looked after children are vulnerable young people who do not quite meet criteria for adult mental health or disability services and struggle with independence.

The new 'staying put' procedures outline how Southwark will meet these requirements.

4. Southwark IRO Service

4.1 The Southwark IRO Service is situated within the Social Work Improvement and Quality Assurance business unit. The Business Unit Manager reports directly to the Director making IROs independent of the operational children's services management structure where allocation of resources lies. The team is based at Tooley Street.

4.2 In addition to the core function of monitoring children's care plans, the IRO Service is also involved in:

- Meetings on individual cases
- Wider consultations
- Planning forums where policy and procedures are developed e.g. Health, Education, Participation and Professional Standards groups,
- Audit work in conjunction with other departments,
- Training and liaison with teams
- Assisting with Complaints
- Working with the commissioning team to monitor the quality of placements.

4.3 During the year IROs have:

- Assisted with development of several policies and procedures. In particular there has been IRO input to the Southwark implementation of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO)
- Provided induction training for new social workers around planning for looked after children.
- Provided inter-agency training around working with parents who have mental health problems
- IROs have attended LAC service Health, Education, Participation and Adoption/Permanency groups.

4.4 IROs highlight good practice by workers as well as feeding back evidence of poor practice, poor standards of placements or safeguarding issues.

4.6 The IRO service establishment consists of 8 full time equivalent IROs. The permanent staff are line managed by the QA service manager. The sessional IROs have long-arm supervision via telephone contact with the QA managers and regular group meetings. Administrative support is provided by a full time executive officer managed by the QAU Admin Manager.

4.7 Staffing in 2011-12 consisted of:

- 4 directly employed permanent staff making up 3 f.t.e. posts
- 14 freelance self employed sessional workers funded by 5 full time equivalent posts. These have varying caseloads of between 14-76 children looked after.

- Of the 18 workers 2 are male, 16 female; 2 are black and 16 are white.

5. PERFORMANCE

- 5.1 The IRO team provides an efficient service, within budget. During 2011 - 2012 the team chaired and completed reports for 1590 reviews of children looked after as well as making representations, participating in staff induction and training, undertaking audits and undertaking a range of other tasks.
- 5.2 Given the budget for the service this represents a unit cost of approximately £308 per review including professional and administrative costs.
- 5.3 The review reports, once signed off by the Team Manager, are the child's Care Plan.
- 5.4 The IRO service 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 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, health appointments etc.

5.5 Performance data 2008-2012

Year	2009-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-12
Number of LAC Reviews	1599	1571	1521	1590
NI66 Reviews in timescales	94.1%	92.8%	95.7%	94%
C63 Participation at Reviews	95.7%	94%	90.2%	95.2%
No of LAC at March 31st	533	557	522	550

- 5.6 The performance in relation to reviews not held within timescales in 2011-12 has dipped slightly from the previous year with 6% of reviews held late. This is a concern but is still within the acceptable range nationally. Of the 6%, the reviews were, in the majority of cases, held within a few days of the deadline date.
- 5.7 In contrast the performance in relation to children over 4 years old participating in their reviews has improved by 5 percentage points.

5.8 PARTICIPATION

The Performance Indicator for child participation is based on number of children who have not contributed to any one of their reviews in a year. A child may participate in 2 out of their 3 reviews in a year but this would not fulfil the criteria for participation.

Summary of participation at Reviews 2011-12	Total
PN0 Child under 4 at date of review	290
PN1 Attendance	1081
PN2 Attendance - views via advocate / IRO	36
PN3 Attendance - views via symbols	3
PN4 Attendance - without contribution	4
PN5 No attendance - views via advocate / IRO	73
PN6 No attendance - views expressed	75
PN7 No attendance - views not exp (Not available)	14
PN7 No attendance - views not exp (Not facilitated)	6
PN7 No attendance - views not exp (YP's choice)	8
Sum:	1590

In total, 4.8% of looked after children over 4 years did not contribute to one of their reviews held during 2011-12. This represents 28 review meetings. In 8 of these meetings it was the young person's choice not to participate in the review. Of the other 20 the young person may have forgotten the review or may have not been able to attend for another reason. Where the attendance of the young person was 'not facilitated' – this might be because the young person was not invited to the meeting or it was felt that the young person should not attend the review for some reason.

In all reviews where a young person does not contribute to the review the IRO will try to agree a plan with the social worker or carer to ensure the young person's views are available for the next review if they are not attending.

5.8 Looked after reviews usually last around 90 minutes. IROs will always aim to spend time individually with children and young people prior to the meeting to determine their wishes and feelings, identify if they have any concerns and find out 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.

5.9 IROs will usually arrange to meet children and young people at different times, or speak to them on the phone 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.

5.10 Distribution of review records

Distribution of reviews is not currently a Performance Indicator. However statutory guidance now indicates that decisions should be circulated within 5 working days/7 days and the full report within 15 working days /21 days.

6. REPRESENTATIONS AND ESCALATIONS

- 6.1 IROs seek to ensure good outcomes for children. They do this through their quality assurance role in LAC reviews e.g. by checking diets are healthy and culturally appropriate, medicals take place, foster carers attend parents evenings or read bedtime stories, check contacts with siblings take place.
- 6.2 IROs pick up often on matters which make a difference to a child if they get overlooked for example ensuring sleepovers or school trips take place; passports are obtained so holidays are not missed; ensuring cultural and faith needs are met such as a prayer mat for young people of the Muslim faith. They will normally do this through suggestions at reviews and encouraging carers and workers rather than via formal escalation processes and so this cannot always be visibly evident or easily quantified.
- 6.3 Here are some examples of informal ways in which IROs reported helping the children they reviewed during 2010-11:
- I was thanked by the foster carers for support in a number of areas including obtaining peer mentor support for a child
 - The Practice manager thanked me for completion of life story script for two siblings
 - I requested a legal planning meeting to terminate contact with a family member following information shared in a review
 - I have received good feedback from a kinship carer for a child. The carer has emailed to say thank you for all my support in moving this case forward
- 6.4 Where there are concerns relating to implementation of the Care Plan, resources or poor practice, IROs will initially liaise with the team and seek to resolve things informally – often by bringing reviews forward or participating in professionals meetings. A record of this should be on the child's record. In the past this was often done via email or discussion with team and so was not previously very visible on the file. However an ICS record format for IROs has now been introduced which has assisted in tracking IRO interventions.
- 6.5 When a concern cannot be resolved informally each Local Authority must now have a formal 'dispute resolution' process through which an IRO can escalate their concern to the appropriate management level.
- 6.7 During 2011-12 IROs made 18 escalations aside from the many other occasions where they liaised informally with social workers. These were in relation to 16 children/sibling groups (2 cases escalated twice). Of these 2 were passed to social workers, 9 were passed to team managers, and 6 to service managers. One case was escalated to the director. Five of the 18 (28%) escalations were due to concern about drift or excessive delay in permanency planning for younger children (0-11). The rest of the escalations (13) were all concerned with young people aged 14 or above.

Concern about quality of placement	1
Concern about support for young people moving to independence	4
Delay in identifying placement	2
Concern about risk to yp (one gang involvement, one running away)	2
Placement in difficulty	2
Education issues	2 (for the same yp)

In all of the above cases, following the escalation the managers concerned worked closely with the IROs to take action to remedy the concerns noted.

7. INVOLVEMENT AND FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

An article about IROs featured in the Speaker box magazine this year. In addition young people from Speakerbox children in care council prepared a one day training session to IROs in Summer 2012 – the ‘Understanding us’ training. Almost all IROs attended this session and thought it was useful. Speakerbox representatives continue to attend and contribute to the bi-monthly IRO meetings.

8. INSPECTION

Children’s Services was inspected in 21/5/12
 Services for looked after children were judged to be good with good capacity for improvement. Specific findings were that:
 ‘The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children is good. The local authority and its partners present as effective corporate parents.’
 ‘Speaker Box and its range of activities presents the authentic voice of the child in care, is very influential, impacting across a wide range of issues.’
 ‘Reviewing officers prioritise contact with children they are responsible for, seeking to establish a meaningful relationship according to the age and capacity of the child.’

9. Education of CLA

9.1 The educational attainment of Looked after children is priority for the IRO service. Many of the informal and formal representations from IROs concern the provision of appropriate education to looked after children.

9.2 As part of the Looked after review the IRO will always review the personal education plan for the child or young person.

10. Safety of CLA

There is much improved recording this year of children that go missing from care.

During 2011-12 there were 88 reports of children going missing for over 24 hours relating to 27 children. The children were aged between 15 -18.

IROs are always informed where young people looked after go missing and are invited where possible to missing from care strategy meetings and planning meetings.

11. KEY SUCCESSES IN 2010 AND FUTURE PRIORITIES

11.1 Key successes in 2010-11 have been

- Maintaining an experienced, committed and trained team of IROs providing consistency for children and young people.
- Improving the level of consultation with looked after children
- The standard of Review reports remains high. 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.
- The IRO service receives positive feedback from partner agencies such as Health, Education and CAMHS. Partners state that they value having an independent professional to liaise with, giving their views weight and integrating them into Care Plans.
- A protocol has been drafted and inserted into the procedures to improve IROs access to court documents in proceedings through a more formal liaison with Legal Section.
- 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 issues to the attention of management – for example drift or serious concerns where workers are ill or where there is poor practice.

11.2 Key Priorities for the IRO Service for 2012-13 are

- From August 2012 there is a monthly IRO report going to the Director Specialist Children's Services. This report will raise the profile of the IRO service and ensure that feedback and escalations are immediately brought to the attention of the senior management team.
- Improving the proportion of LAC reviews held to time.
- Ensuring that all children and young people continue to participate in a meaningful way in their LAC reviews or are spoken to separately by the IRO.
- Improving the timeliness of completion and distribution of reports as timescales for distribution of review decisions are decreased in the new guidance.
- To ensure that IROs always take account of risk factors in chairing reviews – both in terms of younger children who may be at risk from placement move or rehabilitation or from older young people at risk from crime or gang-related activity or from going missing.
- IROs are to attend specialist Voice training on Secure accommodation reviews in March 2013.
- 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 .

- Working with the Speaker Box council to obtain more information from children and young people as to how the review process and IRO role can be more useful for them
- Implementation of the new LASPO Act 2012 – this has already started to significantly increase the number of young people who are deemed looked after and will put increased pressure on the IRO group.

12. SUMMARY

The IRO Service has continued to provide an efficient and effective provision for reviewing and monitoring the Care Plans for Looked After Children during 2011-12.

The service 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 Operational Teams and Management on planning and practice issues.

Communication and relationships with teams are positive with the independent scrutiny valued by social workers and management.