

APPENDIX 1

Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Annual Report

April 2016 - March 2017



**The contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to quality assuring
and improving services for children in care**

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1. Introduction

A strong Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) service is a key component of good corporate parenting. The IRO service aims to work jointly with the local authority's children's service, senior managers and partners in supporting improved outcomes for Southwark's children in care through robust oversight and challenge of their needs, quality of care and progress against care plans, as individuals and as an important vulnerable group within our local community. It is recognised that in achieving this aim, whilst the service has strengths, there is much work to do in increasing the consistency, quality and impact of the IRO service in improving outcomes for children and young people in Southwark's care.

The service has some strong points. Overall, the IROs are passionate and committed to Southwark's children in care, highly experienced and knowledgeable of their rights and entitlements, they know their children and young people well, often being one of the most stable professionals in the children and young people's lived experience of being in care. As a group they have contributed to driving up standards in key areas such as permanence, voice, wishes and feelings of the child, and health and education outcomes. SpeakerBox, our local children in care council is managed within the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU), it works across the council and its partners and continues to be a beacon of good practice.

The IRO service recognises it needs to improve. In reviewing areas for improvement for 2017-18, the key issues will be improving management oversight and challenge. In this context, further work is needed to embed a more robust approach to escalating issues to senior managers, to better contribute to care planning, including challenge of progress and impact on outcomes for key groups of young people, such as those in residential care, those placed furthest away from the borough and those where achieving permanence may be taking too long. Although progress has been made this year, further work is still needed to challenge services and partners to improve timeliness and quality of health assessments, Personal Education Plans (PEPs), and identification and action against safeguarding risks, especially regarding Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and those who go missing from care. Furthermore, the IRO service needs to play its role in supporting the wider system in tackling the decline in both short and long term stability of children and young people in care, particularly adolescents and where there is strong correlation with the quality and sufficiency of placements. These areas for development concur with findings of the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework (SIF) of March 2017, which rated the 'experiences and progress of children in care' as requiring improvement.

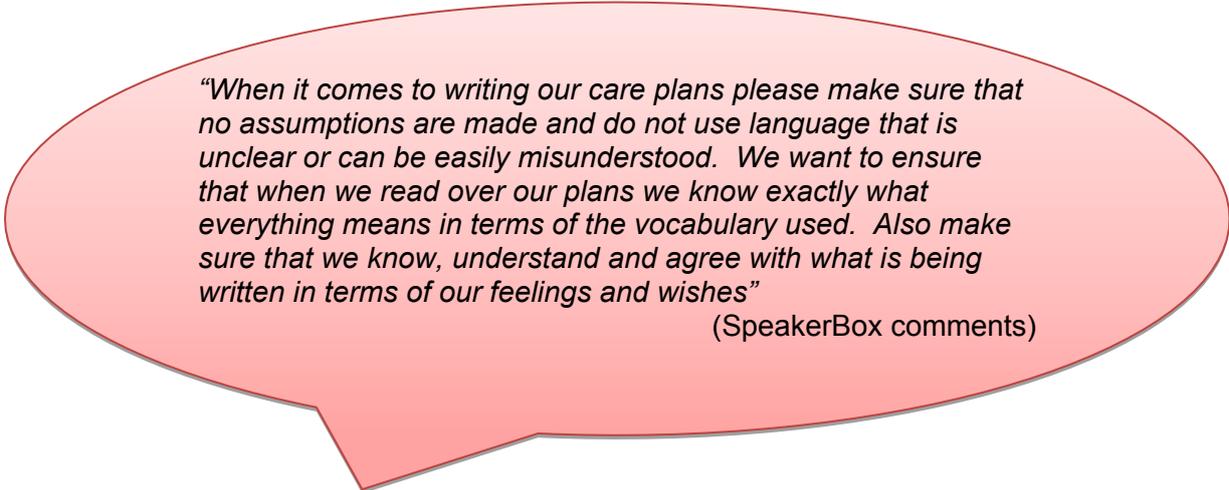
The IRO service is set within the framework of the updated IRO handbook, linked to care planning regulations and guidance updated in June 2015. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children in care and for challenging drift and delay. The IRO is responsible for identifying themes and ensuring these are effectively reported to the local authority to impact positively on practice and outcomes for children and young people in care.

This report has been produced by the IRO service in line with statutory guidance. The report provides an overview of the IRO service over 12 months, covering the period 1 April 2016-31 March 2017.

2. The role of an IRO

The statutory role of the Independent Reviewing Officer was introduced by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, with a duty to monitor the local authority's functions by means of regular statutory reviews of the care plan of children and young people in care. 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. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 expanded the role of the IRO to include monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis, as well as reviewing the child's care plan. Regulations issued in 2010 (Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations) were accompanied by 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 included within these regulations.

The Independent Reviewing Officer's primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child in care and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given due consideration. To be successful, the role must be valued by senior managers and operate within a supportive service culture and environment. An effective IRO service should enable the local authority to achieve improved outcomes for children.



"When it comes to writing our care plans please make sure that no assumptions are made and do not use language that is unclear or can be easily misunderstood. We want to ensure that when we read over our plans we know exactly what everything means in terms of the vocabulary used. Also make sure that we know, understand and agree with what is being written in terms of our feelings and wishes"

(SpeakerBox comments)

The purpose of the child's review is to consider the quality of the child's care plan, based on the local authority's assessment of the child's needs. The care plan for each individual child must specify how the authority proposes to respond to the full range of the child's needs. The IRO must be satisfied that the plan identifies who is responsible for achieving the plan's objectives and has clear timescales set.

Each child in care has a named IRO who has independent oversight of their case including:

- Determining and representing the child's wishes and feelings
- Ensuring their rights and interests are protected
- Assessing whether the local authority's 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.

“Seeing a positive impact in what the worker is doing helps to motivate us as young people and encourages us to fully commit to the plan set out”

(SpeakerBox comments)

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 going into care
- second review within 90 days
- subsequent reviews at 180 day intervals
- when a child or IRO asks for one
- when significant events occur or when the care plan is changed.

The reviews take place at the child’s placement wherever possible. Parents, residential workers, foster carers and their support workers, social worker and the IRO will attend the review meeting. Reports from other professionals such as health, education and CAMHS specialists are also considered at the review meeting. 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. Almost all reviews and conferences are held to time and with good rates of child and family participation.

3. The IRO Service in Southwark

The Southwark IRO Service is situated within the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU). The Head of Quality Assurance reports to the Assistant Director, Quality and Performance Improvement making IROs independent of the operational children’s services management structure.

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

- meetings on individual cases and offering consultation and advice for operational staff
- 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
- joint work with the commissioning team to monitor the quality of placements
- highlighting good practice by social workers
- oversight and challenge of practice areas requiring improvement.

During the year IROs have:

- assisted with development of local policies and procedures

- provided induction training for new social workers around planning for children and young people in care
- attended health, education, participation and adoption/permanency groups
- One IRO leads on sexually harmful behaviour (SHB) and chairs the SHB panel.

Permanent staff are managed by the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) service managers. There is a joint job description for IROs and child protection (CP) chairs. This means that some looked after reviews are chaired by CP chairs. This is intended to reflect the journey of the child so that if a chair knows a family they can continue as an IRO if a child goes into care. Administrative support is provided by a fulltime executive officer managed by the QAU Administration Manager.

Staffing in 2016-17 consisted of:

- Four directly employed permanent staff who act predominately as IROs plus 5 CP conference chairs who carry out occasional Looked After Children (LAC) reviews
- 13 freelance self-employed sessional workers funded by three full time equivalent posts. These have varying caseloads of around 14 - 70 children.

A key strength of the current service is the stable, highly experienced IRO and Child Protection Chair workforce. In the main, staff have good working relationships with social workers, managers, children and SpeakerBox – the children in care council. A particularly strong feature being they often remain with children throughout their care journeys.

4. Southwark's Children in Care

Southwark has relatively high numbers of children and young people in care compared to other London boroughs. At the end of March 2017, there were 499 children in care, of these approximately 25% were under five, 25% were post 16, and with the remainder of statutory school age. In addition, some 360 young people have care leaver status.

Key features of Southwark's children and young people

- There continues to be over-representation of children and young people with black or dual heritage in care
- Although numbers are declining, rates of children in care per 10,000 are still higher than Statistical Neighbours (SN) at 2016-17 rate of 78, versus 61 for SN 2015-16
- Overall, we are seeing reductions in new entrants to care from younger ages and increases in older children (10-15 years, and 16 plus, and higher proportions of males - approximately two thirds)
- Although less children and young people are entering care, children and young people tend to stay in care longer (268 children in care commencement in 2016-17 against 247 cessations)
- New and older children in care are increasingly having a range of complex issues and needs, as result we have seen rises in demand for higher cost and specialist support including secure and residential placements

- Approximately 60% of children and young people are entering care on Section 20 where parents agreed to the child being accommodated; 60% have a previous history with social care and 20% have been in care before.

Education of our children and young people in care

The educational attainment of children and young people in care is a priority for the IRO service. Many of the informal and formal representations from IROs concern the provision of appropriate education. As part of the LAC review, the IRO will always review the personal education plan for the child or young person.

The Virtual School provides a good service to children in care and works closely with IROs and improvements to joint working are currently being explored. One area that continues to be challenging is the identification of education resources for children and young people with special educational needs when they are placed out of the borough. In these cases the IROs work closely with the virtual school and the host local authority, but there is still sometimes a delay in identifying appropriate resources in a timely way. The completion of personal education plans for children and young people has continued to improve in 2016-17. IROs receive regular performance reports flagging whether PEPs have been completed so that they can follow up in reviews.

Health of our children and young people

All children and young people in care should have regular assessments of their health. This is monitored by IROs in LAC reviews. The following table gives the headline performance in relation to health checks for 2016-17.

Year	No. of children with health surveillance checks up to date	No. of children immunisations up to date	No. of children their teeth checked by a dentist	No. of children who have had their annual health assessment	No. of children identified as having a substance misuse problem	No. of children who received intervention for substance misuse problem	No. of children offered intervention for substance misuse problem but declined
2017	13	296	291	306	25	16	7
	87%	90%	89%	93%	8%	64%	28%
2016	26	236	312	327	29	11	8
	90%	69%	91%	96%	9%	38%	28%

As illustrated by the data, a significant improvement has been made in immunisation performance and interventions for substance misuse. There is a slight decrease in health assessment and dental checks; just two children under five years old did not have an up to date health check. Since the Summer of 2015 the specialist nurse for children in care has attended drop-in sessions at Talfourd Place and offers informal health advice and advocacy for young people.

Key challenges in meeting the needs of children in care

The challenges for Southwark reflect many of the challenges faced by other local authorities and inner city areas. In particular, at the forefront of IRO work are the following areas which continue to shape the role and function of the IRO service:

- **High risk of children and young people in care being targeted for CSE.** A systematic process of risk assessments for all young people in care is being implemented, especially where they are placed out of Southwark and where they are

exhibiting other high risk behaviours such as criminal activity, running away or substance misuse.

- **Children and young people in care going missing.** This remains a key area for joint work with frontline staff and the police especially quality and timeliness of return home interviews. During 2016-17 a total of 663 missing episodes were recorded for 127 looked after children, a marked increase, which is broadly attributed to improved recording. IROs are always informed where young people in care go missing and are invited to contribute to missing from care strategy meetings and planning meetings.

“Build a relationship with me and get to know me – it’s important to us that we are treated like individuals who have a story to tell like everyone else in the world. ...It’s essential we have a unique and healthy relationship with our social workers and PAs whilst enabling us all to have a solid foundation of communication. There may be reasons why a young person is not returning to their placement. They may be feeling neglected or isolated within their placement or even worse; being emotionally or physically abused”.

(SpeakerBox comments)

- **Children and young people in care being placed further from home.** This has particular impact on making sure that children have the right education and health support quickly, and that those in residential care and placed furthest from home are not disadvantaged and are having their needs met. There has been a slight increase in distant out of borough placements in 2016-17, with a higher than average proportion of children placed 20 miles or more. These placements are subject to careful scrutiny by the children’s social workers and IROs, who take a key role in ensuring this features in the care planning process.

“We feel our workers should be well informed about placement locations and the surroundings so that they are able to encourage us to find local opportunities and help us to feel comfortable settling into our new locations”.

(SpeakerBox comments)

- **Helping all children and young people achieve permanency.** To ensure that children are in permanent placements, and achieving permanency for those in long-term foster care, as soon as possible if they are not returning to their family.
- **Sufficiency of good quality placements.** To identify sufficient local placements appropriate to the diverse needs of children and young people, especially for

adolescents. This is a significant contributory factor to our declining stability, with improving placement sufficiency being a key priority for the local authority and its partners.

- **Young people are prepared for independence.** To ensure that young people leaving care are fully equipped for independence and achieve good outcomes. This sits within the context of the recently awarded Department for Education (DfE) innovation bid for a Care Leavers' Trust, and we will be considering the role of IROs in this local development.

5. Participation, advocacy and escalations

SpeakerBox, Southwark's children in care council, updated the 'Golden rules' for social workers in May 2016. Copies of these rules are used in social work training and have been circulated to the different service areas for display and discussion (see appendix 1 – 'Golden rules' from SpeakerBox).

The top themes raised by SpeakerBox members throughout the year have been:

- relationships with social workers / personal advisors and turnover of staff
- placements and contact with siblings
- finances (i.e. late payments or not accessing savings)
- understanding and accessing entitlements
- making the pathway planning process more young people friendly.

The children's rights service ran a campaign 'Sibling contact matters to me' in 2016-17. This involved research, an animation workshop, a spoken word workshop and the making of a video about sibling contact with the Rainbow collective. The video is to be launched in October half term 2017. SpeakerBox are actively working with young people and the Bubble Theatre Company on building relationships with social workers which will result in a training video for staff.

Barnardos currently provide advocacy for children and young people in care and care leavers in Southwark. The advocates meet regularly with the IRO group in order to encourage IROs to refer children where appropriate. A total of 102 children and young people received advocacy support from the Barnardo's service in 2016-17.

Children in care reviews

During 2016-17 the IRO team chaired and completed reports for 1319 reviews of looked after children as well as making representations, participating in staff induction and training, undertaking audits and undertaking a range of other tasks.

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Number of LAC Reviews	1548	1377	1235	1319
NI66 LAC Reviews in timescales	96.5%	92%	87.8% (416)	90%
C63 Participation at LAC Reviews	94%	94%	96.4% (1,190)	97%
LAC numbers at 31 March	550	503	474	498

The number of children and young people in care rose slightly during 2016-17 and this is reflected in the increase in looked after reviews held. The recorded performance in relation to reviews held within timescales during 2016-17 was slightly better than the previous year.

Overall, there are good participation rates of children and young people in their reviews, although consistency and quality of that participation remains an areas for development. IROs always aim to spend time individually with children and young people prior to a review to determine their wishes and feelings and identify if they have any concerns and determine 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.

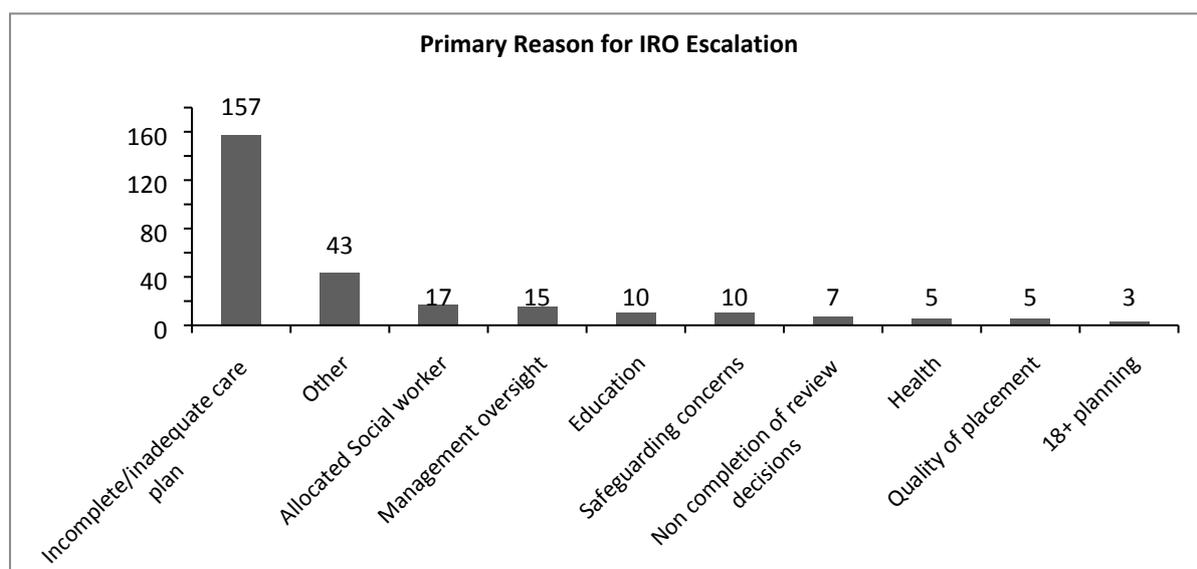
Where a child has not attended their review, the IRO will always arrange to meet children and young people at a different time, or speak to them on the phone to try and gain their views. Children and young people who have English as a second language will have an interpreter available. Children with disabilities or with communication difficulties will be supported to express their views with help of their carers or a specialist worker or advocate.

Southwark's performance remains strong in involving young people in their reviews and ensuring that plans reflect their views. Only 3% of children in care over the age of four did not participate or give their views in a looked after review meeting in 2016-17. Improving the consistency and quality of participation in reviews remains an ongoing commitment of the IRO service.

Escalations

IROs play a key role in scrutinising and improving care planning and challenging drift and delay. The consistency of quality and impact of this challenge remains an area for development, with some examples of good practice to build on.

During 2016-17 there were a total of 268 escalations on 170 children over the year and the reasons for the escalations are shown in the chart below. Escalations were raised for a variety of reasons however the largest proportion of escalations were for incomplete or inadequate care plan recording in Mosaic.



Overall, most escalations are responded to promptly by operational managers and in five cases the matter was escalated to an Assistant Director or above to resolve. Of the 18 escalations regarding drift in care planning, 12 children are now in permanent placements. Key practice themes were timeliness of support for children returning home to support successful rehabilitation, suitable placements for children, and improvements in placing siblings together. The biggest number of the escalations related to LAC review paperwork completion, a consequence of implementing Mosaic, the new case management system. There is intensive work planned over the summer 2017 to resolve the improved recording of LAC reviews following the change from Carefirst to the Mosaic case management system. More user friendly forms are being designed along with new performance reports to help signal where children do not have up to date care plans or reviews, as well as staff training. It is anticipated that this will address the large number of late or incomplete care plans.

Examples of IRO escalations

- i) The IRO contacted the head of the local authority's care service concerning two young children under 5 years old who were waiting to be adopted. The IRO was concerned about a possible delay in the case moving forward; the head of the care service responded quickly and the children were successfully adopted.
- (i) The IRO contacted the local authority's advanced practitioner (AP) regarding two young asylum seeking women aged 17. The IRO wanted faster progress with their care planning. The AP responded to the escalation and in a very short period their health assessments were carried out, education placements were arranged and Home Office interviews were scheduled.
- (ii) The IRO contacted the local authority's care service in connection with a large family, where all the children were at risk of going into care and were waiting for legal proceedings to start for the court to determine their outcome. The IRO was concerned that the delay in a police investigation had impacted on the planning for the children. The local authority's Practice Group Lead manager (PGL) responded to the IRO and full legal proceedings were started shortly afterwards; the children are now all in permanent placements.

6. The IRO Service – strengths and areas for development

A key priority for the department as a whole has been to strengthen management oversight within the context of our practice model – Social Work Matters. In doing so, there has been an increase in our leadership capacity with the introduction of Assistant Director level posts across Safeguarding, Early Help, Family and Youth Justices Safeguarding, and Quality and Performance. The latter brings together quality assurance and performance services under a single leadership. Much work has been done to review and strengthen strategic and operational governance across key decision-making panels for at risk cohorts, such as those at risk of CSE, under PLO arrangements, on plans for second or subsequent times and at the edge of care – all of which offer an additional level of senior management scrutiny to

casework, decision-making and thresholds. Work continues to improve the quality and consistency of key management oversight processes such as supervision, LAC and child protection reviews.

The local Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) offers a sound service, and has been the driving force behind some of our most successful changes, such as the introduction of Signs of Safety (SoS). A stable, highly experienced IRO and Child Protection Chair workforce has good working relationships with staff, children and SpeakerBox.

The QAU offers challenge and support through a range of approaches including a consultation service for practitioners considering child protection plans and the Challenge and Support panel to address drift and delay for children and young people in the child protection system. Our child protection chairs all hold specialist interest roles, for example sexually harmful behaviour, domestic abuse and CSE which includes training social workers and providing expert input to complex cases. There is a multi-agency observation programme of child protection reviews and which has supported practice developments in working with hard to engage fathers and domestic abuse perpetrators and providing the learning for our rollout of practice observation to a range of other areas.

Key strengths

- Continuing improved standards of review reports. Review reports provide a pen picture of the child, synopsis of family history and a six monthly summary of the case, including assessed needs and action plans in line with locally developed standards
- An experienced, stabled and passionate workforce that knows their children well
- Good multi-agency working with both the virtual school and health, for example, joint work with the lead doctor in building a profile of the health needs of our children in care to support service development
- IRO contributions to system-wide improvements in permanency planning
- Ongoing commitment and visible impact of the child's voice, including maintaining good rates of child participation and supporting the work of SpeakerBox.

Areas for development for 2017-18

- Develop and embed a more robust approach to tracking and reviewing the impact and outcome of IRO escalations. This is linked to introduction of a Mosaic escalation form.
- To strengthen consistency in quality of management oversight and challenge by IROs in care planning, including better oversight and challenge of progress for vulnerable groups, namely those children
 - in residential care
 - placed furthest away from the borough
 - where achieving permanence may be taking too long, such as for some children in long term foster care.

- Strengthen IRO impact on improving the timeliness and quality of health assessments, PEPs, and safeguarding especially regarding child sexual exploitation and children who go missing from care.
- Actively contribute to supporting the wider system and frontline teams in tackling the decline in both short and long-term stability of children in care, particularly adolescents - through spotting escalating risks and informing service development. There is a strong correlation between this and work on improving the quality and sufficiency of placements
- To improve the quality and consistency of child and young person's participation in reviews and to ensure that all children and young people are always spoken to separately by the IRO
- Participation in the Making Mosaic Better work areas to improve system and processes for recording work of IROs.

These areas for development concur with findings of the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework (SIF) published in March 2017, which rated the 'experiences and progress of children in care' as requiring improvement. We are seeking a peer review partner to assist us in undertaking a more in-depth assessment of strengths and areas for development for the IRO service as a whole. Development areas form part of our local service improvement plan.

Appendix 1 – Golden rules from SpeakerBox

Young people from SpeakerBox, Southwark’s children in care council, developed a set of ‘Golden rules’ in May 2016. The Golden rules are for social workers in Southwark to work by and ensure their practice and approach reflects these rules:

Listen Up	Our views are important and need to be taken seriously.
Be Honest	Tell us why we are in care. Tell us the TRUTH. Please tell us about our rights to see our records too. This can help us understand our past.
Be Reliable	Turn up on time and always return our calls. If you do not see us every 6 weeks, keep us updated with phone calls or messages. If you promise something, make sure you keep it. Let us know and remind us when you are coming, and give us more than 24 hours notice unless it is a Child Protection visit. We have lives too.
Our Way of Saying It	Go through the consultation document with us instead of sending it through the post. Make sure you know how we feel and be creative to help us find the best way to express it. It can be hard to say how you feel on a long form and it can feel overwhelming.
Quality Time	The quality of the visit is more important than how long the visit is. Everyone can not sit and talk for an hour. Sometimes we want to do an activity while we talk. The review does not count as a visit.
Good Conversation	Ask new and varied questions on each visit. Do not ask the same questions every time. Get to know us. There is more to us than just being in care.
Good Meetings	We do not want too many meetings, and we do not want any people there that do not have to be there. We do not want to miss school or college because of meetings! Make sure you send us the decisions from the meeting within two weeks or at least within a month.
Help Us Keep in Contact	We want help to keep in touch with our family. We also want help with keeping in touch with extended family members. Support us to make contact as good as possible. If there is a reason why we can not have contact explain it, do not just say no.
Money Matters	Tell us about what we are entitled to, since we speak to each other. We should have saving accounts and have this explained to us.
Documents for Life	Always check to see if we have a passport and a birth certificate. Always clarify a child or young person’s status. If this can not be done, make sure you write the reason why.
Believe in Us	We need someone to believe in us and show us that we can achieve more than we have ever imagined.