

Annual Report

Independent Reviewing Service Children in Care

DRAFT

April 2018 to March 2019

Tom Stevenson

Assistant Director, Quality Assurance & Performance

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1. Introduction

A strong Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) service is a key component of good corporate parenting. The IRO service works jointly with the local authority's children's service, senior managers and multi-agency partners to support improved outcomes for Southwark's children in care. This is done through robust oversight and challenge of how services meet their needs, the quality of care and progress against care plans, both as individuals and as a vulnerable group within our local community.

The IRO Service operates within the statutory guidance provided by the IRO Handbook. This is issued under two provisions: The Children and Young Persons Act 2008, which created a new power for the Secretary of State to issue statutory guidance to IROs; sections 1 and 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which requires local authorities, in the exercise of their social services functions, to act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State; unless there are exceptional reasons local authorities must follow the requirements set out in this guidance. The IRO Handbook should be read in conjunction with the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (2010).

This report provides an overview of the IRO Service for the period *1 April 2018- 31 March 2019*. The statutory guidance makes clear an Annual Report should be produced for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Committee. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed. It should make reference to:

- procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and it should include an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;
- the development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;
- extent of participation of children and their parents;
- the number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;
- outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews; and
- whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children.

2. The statutory role of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

Introduced by the *Adoption and Children Act 2002*, the statutory role of the IRO monitors how the local authority fulfils its duty to children in care through regular statutory reviews of their care plans. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning and for challenging drift and delay. The IRO has a unique power to refer a case to the Children's and Families Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) if local escalation and resolution processes cannot resolve any dispute over how a child in care's needs are being met. All children in care including those on adoption plans or receiving short breaks are included within these regulations.

The IRO's primary role 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. The role should be valued by senior managers and operate within a supportive service culture and environment to be successful. An effective IRO service supports the local authority to achieve improved outcomes for children.

The child's review considers the quality of the care plan which is based on the social work assessment of the child's individual needs. The care plan should set out how the full range of the child's identified needs will be met. The IRO must be satisfied that the plan identifies who is responsible for achieving the plan's objectives, that the resources identified can be utilised and that clear timescales for each stage of progression are set.

Each child in care has a named IRO who provides independent oversight including:

- Determining and representing the child's wishes and feelings
- Ensuring their rights and interests are protected
- Assessing whether the care plan meets the child's assessed needs and progression is timely
- Negotiating with the social work team on any identified issues arising from the care plan or implementation of the care plan. They can escalate unresolved concerns through the local authority's management structure, and/or if necessary to CAFCASS.

The main forum through which the IRO carries out their monitoring role is the statutory child in care 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 review takes 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. Almost all reviews and conferences in Southwark are held to time and with good rates of child and family participation.

3. The IRO Service in Southwark

The IRO Service is delivered by the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU). This places it outside the operational social work management structure thus supporting and facilitating the independent function of the IRO. In the period of this report up to November 2018 the Head of Social Work Improvement & Quality Assurance had line management responsibility for the service assisted by the Quality Assurance Manager and the LADO. Following the retirement of the post holder, for the remainder of the reporting year this was undertaken by the Quality Assurance Manager. For 2019/20 the IRO Service has in place a newly established Quality Assurance Service Manager (Care) dedicated to managing the IRO Service. Administrative support is provided by a fulltime executive officer managed by the QAU Administration Manager.

IROs and Child Protection (CP) Chairs continue to share a joint job description allowing for flexibility across the service and ensuring continuity of oversight and review from the same person when children and young people move from CP Plans into being looked after.

The IRO Service operates a “mixed economy” approach to staffing. There are three directly employed permanent staff who act predominately as IROs plus five CP conference chairs that carry out child in care reviews. This is augmented by the use of freelance sessional IRO’s, many of whom have been involved with young people for a long time. Caseloads vary as a result but we have continued to have the ability to maintain caseloads at the optimum levels for permanent staff.

A key strength of the service remains the stable, highly experienced IRO and CP Chair cohort. There is diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity and cultural background amongst the IRO group but it is not fully reflective of Southwark’s children in care population. The IRO’s however consider and promote the specific ethnicity and diversity needs of children and young people through their review of how these are addressed in care plans.

IRO’s are all registered social workers and the service maintains good working relationships with the operational social work teams, Access to Resources and the Children’s Rights & Participation Officer who co-ordinates Speakerbox – the Southwark Children in Care Council. Most importantly, IRO’s through the longevity of many relationships have strong connections with children and young people in care.

4. The Ofsted Focussed Visit – January 2019

Ofsted found that the IROs was “*having an increasing impact on improving the quality of practice and of reviews*”. Child in care reviews were timely in most cases and there were individual responses to children’s needs when their circumstances changed. Children’s participation in their reviews and the care given to obtaining their wishes and feelings was seen as a strong feature. Care plans under review were seen to contain clear descriptions of children’s needs, and when the plan envisaged a return home there was evidence of risk assessment and appropriate follow up action that supported children and their families. Some plans however were not specific and detailed enough to give a clear structure and pathway for any actions needed.

One of the main learning points for the IRO Service was that although inspectors could see impact, the IRO footprint was still not sufficiently evident across young people’s case records; with a clear correlation between improvements seen and the IRO’s involvement.

The Focused Visits and our own intelligence gathering suggests that there is a real opportunity for IRO’s to provide a consultative and mentoring role to social workers around the quality and outcome focus for care plans, as well as being instrumental in ensuring that early permanency planning is routine.

5. Child in care reviews

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2019/20
Number of reviews	1548	1377	1235	1319	1268	1588
Reviews held in timescale	96.5%	92%	87.8% (416)	90%	91%	91%
Child in care numbers at 31 March at year end	550	503	474	498	491	458

During 2018/19 the IRO service undertook 1588 reviews of looked after children. 91% of these were held within statutory timescales. The 9% of reviews not held on time relates to a number of reasons. In the main there is still a need to record reviews outside of Mosaic which can lead to reporting errors in a small number of cases. There are some delayed reviews related to late notification of care entry which then reduces the service’s ability to set up an initial review in time; or IRO’s missing statutory deadlines because the review has been set up without spare capacity to respond to any cancellation within the deadline. The Access to Resources Team is responding to the former area and the service is booking all reviews at a 5-month interval to allow for re-arrangement when necessary. As part of our current refocusing of the IRO Service we will arrange meetings between the IRO Service, A&I, SFS and the Care Service to resolve issues and improve the timeliness of our reviews, with a target of 95% completion within time for 2019/20.

6. Analysis of issues raised in dispute (escalations) and outcomes

IROs raise concerns about children in care through an escalation process. The IRO Service reviewed this process during the early part of 2018/19 and a new system was designed to record escalations and outcomes on the child's case record. This new escalation process was built into Mosaic as a "workstep" and that has enabled better reporting of concerns about the care plan or other aspects of a young person's care to operational managers. This has been in place since last November and has seen an increase in recorded activity that also allows reports to be generated giving more evidence of the IRO footprint on casework.

The majority of concerns that IRO's have around aspects of a young person's care are still dealt with at an informal level with social workers and team managers. These are still responded to on the whole promptly and the escalation process is used when some of these informal approaches have not resulted in the necessary action. Once raised the majority of escalations are resolved at Stage 1 and 2 with few having to be progressed to Assistant Director or Director level.

In 2017/18 there were 219 escalations. In 2019/20 there were 185. This is a reduction of 15% which represents a significant step in a stronger system for looked after children. The nature of the escalations is set out in the table below.

Reason for escalation	Number	%
Inadequate care plan	79	42.7
Care plan delay	31	16.8
Other	17	9.2
Social work provision	8	4.3
Education	14	7.6
Follow-up actions	5	2.7
Safeguarding	2	1.1
Placement	8	4.3
Health (new category)	5	2.7
18+ planning (new category)	8	4.3
Action and effectiveness of management (category no longer used)	8	4.3
Total	185	100.0

Although inadequate care plans continues to be the main reason for escalation, this has dropped by more than 25% in the last year. “Inadequate” in this context means that the plan is not complete in time for the review, but to bring more clarity to this indicator the service will work with Mosaic to provide expanded drop-down options. Drift in the care planning has however risen by 6% in the same period which represents an increase of 9 cases. A key part of the reason for this is that the service has increased its scrutiny and standards around permanence particularly for long term foster care and this has led to less tolerance for delay and more intervention by IROs to progress plans to permanence. Very often this relates to children who have been settled in what have become long term placements which need to be ratified as such. There have been other increased concerns seen below, which although modest, do demonstrate some of the issues around stability of workforce and continuity of delivery to children and young people in placement. This is when the long term nature of some IRO relationships with children and young people becomes important in providing a continuing thread in young people’s understanding of their stories.

7. Good practice

Some examples of the good practice noted by IRO's are outlined below. The Service currently do not use the escalation process to highlight positive examples of social work, instead using a monitoring form or simply writing to team managers or the social worker directly to commend the good work they have observed. Going forward this aspect of oversight will be a set agenda item in Service Meetings and as part of supervision.

One example involved difficulties in gaining an SEN school placement in Kent which has extremely high demand and the IRO highlighted the very good work the social worker had put into finding and supporting an excellent placement whilst a school place was awaited.

"You've done a great piece of work with him Jane, and have set him on a really positive path. Without your input I think there was a risk of continuing instability and some potentially poor outcomes for him".

Another example related to drift connected to progressing the care plan because of changes of social worker. The new social worker made excellent progress in a short time, achieving positive outcomes, the most notable of which was progressing his immigration claim swiftly so that it was settled before his 18th birthday and his transition to independence was not overshadowed by that uncertainty.

"Dear Andrew, Just to let you know, following KM's final LAC review yesterday at [the placement], that Natasha and Tina have made excellent progress in moving things forward for him. This is a huge relief. All the paperwork for his citizenship application is with the solicitor, and she will submit it to the Home Office this week. She will also advise the LA on whether or not a separate application under the EU Settlement Scheme will need to be made before his 18th birthday.....Natasha has done some excellent work with KM in a very short space of time, and has already made a difference".

Another example highlighted good work within the Family Drug & Alcohol Court (FDAC) where the social worker provided good quality Court Reports that were rooted in evidenced based practice that supported the proposed Care Plan and had been discussed with and supported by the IRO.

Similar positive feedback was provided to the social worker on another case where the social worker had communicated fully and effectively with the child, enabling them to understand the Court process and the reasons why outcomes were delayed because of adjournments. In that case the IRO also praised the social worker's "water tight knowledge" of the family and how this directed the case.

In another case the IRO praised the social worker for the “fantastic support “she provided to the unaccompanied asylum seeking young person, when seeking to gain asylum in the UK. The young person experienced very high levels of anxiety about his application to the Home Office to the extent that there was the possibility of self harm. The social worker supported him emotionally in preparing for his legal appeal and also advocated for him, making sure his legal representation were active on his behalf.

8. Participation in reviews

In 2018/19 almost 97% of children in care participated in their review process in some way. This is the same as the previous 2 years. Where young people do not attend or give a view the reasons for these are noted. The majority are older teenagers on the cusp of independence who perhaps do not see the value in the Review Meeting, and a secondary group are those young people who were missing from placement on the day of the Review (11 individuals). In only one situation was a young person not at a review because it was felt that their profound disability affected their ability to communicate a view in some form. There are a very small number of what are classed as “executive” or paper reviews which are administrative exercises which young people do not attend. Participation may have been through physical attendance and speaking for themselves which 71% of children and young people did; through completing a consultation form, via advocacy or through pre-review discussion with the IRO. It is important that passive attendance is not seen as participation and IROs encourage young people to chair or co-chair their reviews. This active participation, with children and young people holding staff accountable for the progression of their care plans, is something that the IRO Service wishes to further promote going forward. The IRO will ensure an advocate is provided to support the child or young person if necessary or requested. Children and young people who have English as a second language have an interpreter available. Children with disabilities or with communication difficulties are supported to express their views with help of their carers or a specialist worker or advocate through non-instructed advocacy.

Form of participation	Nos	%
child attends and speaks for themselves	865	71%
child does not attend but conveys their feelings to the conference	136	11%
child does not attend but asks advocate to speak for them	37	3%
child under 4 at time of review	127	10%
child attends and conveys their views non-verbally	17	1%
child attends and an advocate speaks for them	4	0.3%
child does not attend nor conveys their view to conference	32	3%
child attends but doesn't speak for themselves/convey their views etc.	6	0.5%

Advocacy and Independent Visiting

As part of a child's first review after coming into care, and at subsequent reviews, the IRO checks that children and young people know how to make a complaint and know that there is an advocacy offer available to them.

During 2018 tendering for our Advocacy and Independent Visiting Service took place and the success of a bid for the delivery of both services from Coram Voice who took over the contracts in January 2019. We are grateful to both *Barnardo's* and *Action for Children* for their previous support to our young people in care and look forward to developing our relationship and the offer available with Coram Voice.

In the three quarters of 2018/19 Barnardo's provided advocacy to 27 children and young people in care - 17 in face to face sessions and 10 via telephone contact. 34 issues were actioned by advocates upon instruction of children and young people with the main presenting issues related to placements at 29% followed by Housing at 18%. The majority of contacts were from those aged 16 and over at 74% of demand.

More enquiries were received from boys/young men at 15 with 12 girls/young women seeking advocacy input. This compares to 17 (f) 14 (m) in 2017/18. The primary demand continues to come from children in care who classify as White British (30%) followed by Black African children (26%) and Black British young people (19%). There are no significant disparities between advocacy demand and representation in the care population. The majority of service users continue to be non-disabled at 19 out of 27. 8 young people had disabilities including 2 with mental health vulnerabilities.

In the first quarter of the Coram Voice contract they reported that 28 young people accessed advocacy support. Some of these were existing young people who continued to receive support during and after the transition from Barnardos. 86% of approaches were from young people 16 and over with 21% of that total being 21 years and over. There was no significant deviation from the previous figures in relation to the gender and ethnicity breakdowns of young people approaching Coram Voice for support.

The total number of children and young people accessing the Independent Visitor Service at the end of March 2019 is 20. There are a further 12 young people awaiting an IV match. The recruitment and matching of new Independent Visitors to respond to some of these young people, is a priority for Coram Voice as part of the implementation of the new contract.

9. Areas for Development for the IRO Service in 2018/19

The IRO service has identified 8 areas for development for 2019/20 as follows:

To develop clarity around the escalation process providing clear timescales for expected response or resolution at Stage 1, 2 & 3.

To improve the way IROs influence by acknowledging and reporting on good practice

Timeliness of reviews to be more closely monitored and to reach the agreed target of 95% or better.

To initiate regular meetings between the IRO Service and the social work services in A&I, SFS and Care to understand and resolve any areas of difficulty and improve timeliness of Reviews, quality of Care Plans and any workflow issues.

To increase dialogue between Speakerbox and the IRO Service to support the development of Young Inspectors as an integral part of assurance work to young people in care.

To incorporate the findings from the Bright Spots survey into areas for scrutiny and development as part of the review process.

To work with the Principal Social Worker to develop joint workshops and other training events that build relationships between the IRO Service and the social work teams and enable IRO expertise to be shared, particularly as part of ASYE programmes.

To develop the audit and learning contribution of IROs to improve the quality and impact of social work practice.