

Item No. 6.	Classification: Open	Date: 22 April 2015	Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		Independent Reviewing Officer's Annual Report 2013/2014	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Director, Children's Social Care	

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the committee consider the information presented in the following report and note the priorities for 2015, as set out in paragraph 74.

Introduction

2. Independent Reviewing Officer's are dedicated to improving outcomes for Looked After Children (LAC). They have a unique insight into every looked after child and are committed to driving improved outcomes for LAC.
3. The IRO service is dedicated to ensuring good outcomes for LAC are achieved and enables the Corporate Parenting Committee to hold services to account.
4. This report contains a summary of work completed by Southwark IRO Service for the period 1 April 2013 – 31 March 2014.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Legal Context

5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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'¹, 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.
8. The handbook states that 'the IRO's primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. To be successful, the role must be valued by

¹ [Independent reviewing officers' handbook - Publications - GOV.UK](#)

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’.

9. 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’.
10. 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 CAF/CASS.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. The LASPO Act 2012 came into force in December 2012. As a result all young people aged 16 and 17 who are remanded are now regarded as looked after children. This has slightly increased the number of looked after children and has put new pressure on the IRO service.

The Southwark Context

14. The census data in 2011 gave Southwark a population of 288,300. 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.
15. Southwark has relatively high numbers of looked after children compared to other London boroughs. There were 504 Children looked After in Southwark on the 21st January 2015.
16. Southwark has an over-representation of black and dual heritage children in care. On 2/12/13 only 35% 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 (29%) and the second highest group is 'Black African' at 102 children (18.5%).

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Key areas for improvement for Southwark Looked after Children Services

17. The key challenges for Southwark Looked after Children Services reflect many of the challenges faced by other Local Authorities and inner city areas, as follows:
 - IRO will intervene following concerns where there are concerns that children and young people may be at risk of abuse or Child Sexual Exploitation. They provide an extra layer of support and advocacy for children and are well placed to develop strategies to keep children safe
 - How to ensure that all young people in care are in education or employment and in particular to ensure that children with special educational needs receive the support and help that they need
 - The need to ensure that children are in permanent stable placements, including adoption, as soon as possible if they are not returning to their family
 - There needs to be significant improvement in the timeliness of adoption. The service has a key function to make sure permanence planning is timely and effective
 - The need to identify sufficient local placements appropriate to the diverse needs of children and young people – especially for young people aged 16 plus
 - There is some evidence that not all young people are fully equipped for independence. The IRO service will take the lead on delivering effective plans for young people so that they are well prepared for leaving care.

Southwark IRO Service

18. The Southwark IRO Service is situated within the social work improvement and quality assurance business unit. The head of quality assurance 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.
19. In addition to the core function of developing and measuring the implementation of 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.

20. During the year IROs have:
- Assisted with development of several policies and procedures including the new staying put procedure.
 - Provided induction training for new social workers around planning for looked after children
 - IROs have attended LAC service Health, Education, Participation and Adoption/Permanency groups
 - Met with the commissioning service to discuss the new Sufficiency policy and contribute to planning around improving the quality of placements.
21. IROs highlight good practice by workers as well as feeding back evidence of poor practice, poor standards of placements or safeguarding issues.
22. 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.
23. Staffing in 2013-14 consisted of:
- 4 directly employed permanent staff making up 3 f.t.e. posts
 - 14 freelance self employed sessional workers
 - 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.

Performance

24. The IRO team provides an efficient service, within budget. During 2013 - 2014 the team chaired and completed reports for 1522 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.
25. Given the budget for the service this represents a unit cost of approximately £300 per review including professional and administrative costs.
26. 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.

Performance data 2010-2014

	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Number of LAC Reviews	1521	1590	1599	1548
NI66 Reviews in timescales	95.7%	94%	95.5%	96.5%
C63 Participation at Reviews	90.2%	95.2%	95.8%	94%
No of LAC at March 31st	522	550	565	550

27. The performance in relation to reviews held within timescales 2013-2014 was slightly improved by 1%
28. There were 21 Looked after reviews held late out of 1548 during the year. In 6 cases the review was late due to IRO error or sickness. The other reviews were late due to late imputing of CLA status or social worker unavailability

Participation

29. The performance indicator for child participation is based on number of children who have 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 would not fulfil the criteria for participation.
30. In total 33 looked after children did not contribute to one or more of their reviews in 2013-2014.
31. The recorded participation of children in reviews has worsened slightly in 2013-2014 which is concerning. In all reviews where a young person does not contribute to the review 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 are not attending.

Summary of participation at Reviews 2013-14	Total
PN0 Child under 4 at date of review	319
PN1 Attendance	1013
PN2 Attendance - views via advocate / IRO	23
PN3 Attendance - views via symbols	0
PN4 Attendance - without contribution	5
PN5 No attendance - views via advocate / IRO	56
PN6 No attendance - views expressed	96
PN7 No attendance - views not exp	36
Sum:	1548

32. IROs will always aim to spend time individually with children and young people prior to a review 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.
33. Where a child has not attended at their review, the IRO will arrange to meet children and young people at different times, or speak to them on the phone to try and gain their views. 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.

Distribution of review records

34. 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.

Representations and Escalations

35. 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.
36. IROs will speak to the allocated social worker and review the Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and health assessments on file for children prior to reviews.
37. 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. 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.
38. 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. An ICS record format for IROs has been introduced which has assisted in tracking IRO interventions.
39. 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.
40. During 2013 -2014 there were 66 representations and escalations to managers from IRO's concerning 60 children. The majority of the escalations were followed up and resolved quickly but in 5 cases the matter had to be escalated to senior managers to resolve.
41. The main themes of the representations made were:

Safety of the young person including risk of CSE/going missing/emotional state	16
Quality of placement	12
Drift/delay in care planning	11
Case unallocated/worker unavailable	10
Education concerns	4
LAC review including no paperwork/social work attendance	4

42. In all of the above cases, following the escalation the managers concerned worked closely with the IRO's to take action to remedy the concerns noted.
43. Southwark Children's social care has been restructured during 2014. The Social Work Matters transformation led to a period in 2014 where there was a marked increase in

the number of children changing their allocated social worker. These changes may have contributed to the 20% increase this year in the number of IRO escalations.

44. However, the new social work operating model frees social workers from unnecessary bureaucracy and enables them to spend more time with children and young people. Work in the Practice Group is more transparent so that poor practice will be identified quickly and remedial action taken. The focus of the new model is high quality practice, delivering good outcomes for children.

Involvement and Feedback from Stakeholders

45. Speakerbox (Southwark children in care council) representatives continued to attend and contribute to the bi-monthly IRO meetings.
46. The Children's Rights service carried out an audit of children who run away from care in 2014. This audit involved face to face interviews of a number of children who had previously run away and flagged up a number of issues that lead children to run away. The audit has been presented to the IRO group and an action plan drawn up.
47. St Christopher's Fellowship are now running a return interview service in Southwark since November 2014 and the lead workers of this project have met with the IRO group.
48. Barnados' provide advocacy for children in care and care leavers in Southwark. The advocates have met with the IRO group.

Inspection

49. Children's Services were last inspected in May 2012. Services for looked after children were judged by the inspectors to be 'good with good capacity for improvement'.
50. 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.'

Education of Children Looked After

51. 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.
52. As part of the Looked after review the IRO will always review the personal education plan for the child or young person.
53. The CLA education team works closely with IRO's. The education lead attended a number of IRO meetings in 2013-2014 to discuss how IRO's can work together with the education team to improve educational outcomes for children.
54. One area that continues to be problematic is the identification of education resources for children with Special Educational Needs where they are placed out of borough. In

these situations the IRO's work closely with the CLA education team and the host authority but there is often a delay in identifying appropriate resources.

55. During 2014 it has been a priority to improve social work performance in completion of Personal Education Plans for children. There is now a regular performance report sent out to all IRO's flagging up whether PEP's have been completed so that they can follow this up in reviews.

Safety of Children Looked After

56. During 2013-2014 there were 119 recorded episodes of children in care going missing for over 24 hours. These episodes were for 38 young people.
57. IRO's are always informed where young people looked after go missing and are invited to missing from care strategy meetings and planning meetings.
58. There has been research in 2013/2014 into children who go missing from care led by the Children's Rights worker. 15 young people were interviewed about their experiences and reasons for running away. One key finding of this review was that none of the young people who went missing recalled having a return interview to find out the reasons for their running away.
59. Southwark have now commissioned St Christopher's Fellowship to provide a return interview service for children missing from home and care. It is expected that this will strengthen the response to children who go missing and enable us to do more work to prevent running episodes.
60. The 'Signs of safety model' was introduced into CP conferences in October 2012. This is a systemic model of working which focuses on the strengths of parents and uses much more parent friendly language. IRO's have received information and training around this model and continue to use the principles of Signs of safety in their reviews.
61. There are a number of initiatives in Southwark to identify and work effectively with young people looked after who may be at risk of sexual exploitation:
 - Southwark is currently working with STEPS B on a research project to look at what works most effectively project. STEPS B is a service for teens engaging in problematic sexual behaviour. An IRO sits on the steering group for this and links to the whole IRO group.
 - A police led Multi-agency sexual exploitation (MASE) panel now meets monthly and looks at young people who may be at risk of CSE. This meeting is complemented by local MAS meetings for young people who may be at risk.
 - Southwark has recently carried out a review of CSE work – this flagged up some issues around identification of CSE which are being addressed by an on-line training programme which is to be rolled out to all staff in the council.
 - A CSE protocol has now been rolled out with clear referral pathways. All young people who may be at risk of CSE are now referred into the MASH for full assessment and to ensure that their cases are tracked.
 - Southwark have now adopted the Phoenix risk assessment model for CSE and this has been circulated to all IRO's so that they can use it in reviews to ensure recognition and response to CSE concerns.

Children placed out of borough

62. There continues to be focus on children who are placed in residential units out of London. Southwark has a high proportion of children who are placed more than 20 miles out of the borough. The Director of Children's Social Care has to sign off these placements and receives a regular report of these children. These placements are subject to careful scrutiny by the children's social worker and the IRO's.
63. IRO's feed into this process by giving their views of the safety of the young people placed out of borough and to ensure that this is factored into the care planning process.
64. The Children's Rights and participation worker is in the process of visiting all children placed in distant residential units to ensure that their voices are heard in this process.
65. A multi-agency audit was carried out in 2014 to look at those children placed long distances out of London. This audit found that the health needs of these children were met but there were some concerns about the co-ordination of other services, specifically education. The report recommended that where children were placed long distances away there should be more frequent looked after reviews. It was also recommended that where children placed far away were in transition that a 'team around the child' should be set up and chaired by the IRO to facilitate a joined up service to young people.
66. The 'Young Inspectors Project' has been started in a partnership between the Commissioning service and the Children's Rights service. In 2014 a number of young people were interviewed by trained young inspectors about their placement in semi-independent accommodation and a report produced for management. This project aims to drive up the quality of placements and will be expanded and continue into 2014-2015 to look at the quality of other residential and fostering placements.
67. In addition the Director, Strategy and Commissioning, has set up a 16+ accommodation review which will report in 2015, to look at how we can improve the accommodation available to older young people in care.

Service transformation

68. Southwark Children's Social Care has transformed the way that it works with children in 2014. The social work teams have been re-structured into smaller, more responsive 'practice groups' and a 'systemic' way of working is being introduced.
69. Whilst this does not directly impact on the statutory role of the IRO, we are looking at ways to ensure that the IRO service can be more closely aligned with the Child protection service. This is in order to ensure that CP chairs are more aware of issues around permanency and placements and conversely IRO's are more aware of risk and the history of children who are in care.
70. Both Child Protection chairs and IRO's will be encouraged where possible to participate in the regular group discussions that the new social work groups have about children in care.
71. We intend to move towards having a joint IRO/CP job description for CP chairs and IRO's. This will mean for example that a CP chair who starts out reviewing a family where a child is on a CP plan will be able to then chair the looked after review of the child if s/he moves into care. It is hoped that this new arrangement will mean a better service for children who are in care or on the edge of care.

72. As part of this process IRO's will now routinely meet together with the CP chair group in 2014-2015.

PRIORITIES FOR THE SERVICE

73. **Key successes in 2013-2014 have been:**

- Maintaining an experienced, committed and trained team of IROs providing consistency for children and young people
- Conduct an audit of review reports to ensure standards are suitably high. The standard of review reports remains high. Review reports provide a pen picture of the child, synopsis of the family history and a good 6 monthly summary of the case, including assessed needs and action plan
- A regular bi-monthly IRO report is being sent to the Director Children's Social Care. This report raises the profile of the IRO service and ensures feedback and escalations are immediately brought to the attention of the senior management team
- The IRO service received 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
- IRO's to attend the adoption working group to reduce delay in permanency planning and achieve better outcomes for Southwark Looked After Children.

74. **Key priorities for the IRO service for 2014-2015 are:**

- Continue to work with operational services to reduce delay in permanency planning: Timeliness on adoption remains a challenge for the service
- To improve the recognition and risk assessment of CSE and ensuring a proactive response to protect young people including response to running away
- To ensure that children placed in residential units out of London are safe and well cared for with improved plans for transition
- To work with front line teams to improve the placement stability of children looked after
- Ensure social workers comply with statutory regulations and guidance in relation to visiting and recording in case records
- To work with the Children's Rights service and the Speaker Box children in care council so that the looked after review process can be made more useful and relevant for young people
- To monitor compliance of social worker with statutory guidance and take swift action whether there are deficits in practice including notifying senior managers

- To improve the IRO overview of the personal educational planning process ensuring that all children who need them have a PEP. Work with the CLA Education Team to improve performance for looked after children
- To ensure that all children and young people participate in a meaningful way in their LAC reviews and are always spoken to separately by the IRO
- To improve 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
- To improve co-working with Southwark legal services to ensure that IRO's are always able to give their views on care plans presented to court.

Summary

75. The IRO Service has continued to provide an efficient and effective provision for reviewing and monitoring the Care Plans for Looked After Children during 2013-2014
76. The IRO service seeks to improve outcomes for children looked after through increasing participation of children and young people in the decision making about their care as well as making independent representations to social work teams and management on planning and practice issues
77. Communication and relationships with teams are positive with the independent scrutiny valued by social workers and management. However, further work needs to be undertaken by the service to evidence a significant impact on outcomes for this vulnerable group.

Community impact statement

78. Southwark Looked After Children services works to promote the best possible outcomes for children in care. The care population is diverse in terms of age, gender and ethnicity and we closely monitor these protective characteristics to ensure we understand specific needs and are able to deliver services that address these needs. It is recognised that placement stability, engagement in education, access to leisure and healthy lifestyles all help to build resilience for young people to successfully achieve economical wellbeing and make a positive contribution. Effective performance monitoring supports these objectives and enables us to identify areas where improvements may need to be made.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
None		

APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Rory Patterson, Director, Children's Social Care	
Report Author	Jackie Cook, Head Of Social Work Improvement And Quality Assurance	
Version	Final	
Dated	11 February 2015	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Director of Legal Services	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services	No	No
Cabinet Member	No	No
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