

Haringey Council – Children’s Services IRO Annual Report 2015/16

The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Children in Care

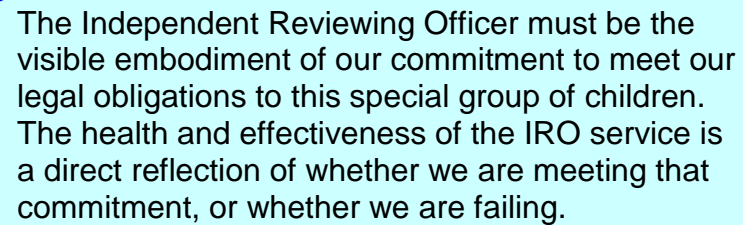
This Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Services in Haringey as required by statutory guidance.

The IRO Annual Report should be presented to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee and the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

Purpose of service and legal context

The Independent Review Officer (IRO) Service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook and linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were first introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the looked after planning and 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 Looked After Children (LAC) and for challenging drift and delay in case decisions and actioning plans.

The National Children’s Bureau (NCB) research ‘The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers in England’ (March 2014) provides a wealth of information about the IRO role and function and findings regarding the efficacy of IRO Services more broadly. The foreword written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson makes the following comment:



The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing.

The NCB research outlines a number of important recommendations with the following three having a particular resonance for IRO work plan priorities:

1. Where IROs identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to looked after children, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.
2. The IRO method for monitoring cases and how this activity is recorded should be clarified.
3. A review of IRO core activities and additional tasks should be undertaken. There is a need to establish whether IROs additional activities compromise independence or capacity.

Key messages – learning and improvement

This Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO services in Haringey, as required by statutory guidance.

The IRO Service was subject to the Ofsted single inspection process which took place between 20th May 2014 and 11th June 2014. The Ofsted inspection report was published on 18th July 2014. The Ofsted (2014) inspection concluded that the IRO Service needed to add rigour and challenge and included the following recommendation to:

"Ensure that the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is enhanced so that they properly challenge drift and delay in plans and escalate concerns about the quality of service provision, so that risks posed to specific groups of children and young people are known and understood and action is taken."

Appendix A includes a summary of the Ofsted (2014) inspection recommendations.

In addition to the Ofsted (2014) inspection process and recommendations, the IRO Service has been engaged in a range of improvement activity throughout the 2015- 2016 year. This activity is summarised below:

- Embedding a culture of supportive challenge and support within and in-between LAC Reviews through ongoing monitoring of children's care planning processes
- Improved quality assurance reporting, as follows;
 - Completing monthly monitoring forms on quality of practice
- Attendance at the Resource Panel and Permanency Tracking Meeting to contribute to quality assurance
- Visiting children prior to the 1st LAC Review
- Embedding the practice of endorsing care plans based on achievable, realistic outcomes with specific outcome focussed decisions through the use of the Signs of Safety model
- Visible challenging of practice which is contrary to the IRO guidance in relation to the movement of children to different placements, returning children home or other decisions not in the child's interest. The Dispute Resolution Process has been used in these instances.

IROs work plan priorities:

Work plan priorities were reviewed following the Ofsted (2014) inspection and included in the service plan. Work plan priorities included:

- Embedding Signs of Safety model into chairing and minuting LAC Reviews
- Increase engagement of children and young people in care planning and decision making
- Reflective team and individual supervision to enhance Impact and outcome focussed practice in reviews
- Ongoing monitoring by the IRO role acting as a critical friend to challenge and support practice. Improve mid way reviews in between LAC Review Meetings.
- IRO to see all children and young people prior to the 1st Review and consult with each young person within the spirit of the IRO guidance
- To improve children's feedback via Viewpoint

Professional Profile of the IRO Service

The IRO Team are part of the Conference and Review Service which sits within the Safeguarding Quality, Impact and Practice Service. The core function includes reviewing Care Plans for looked after children and young people and monitoring the local authority in respect of its corporate parenting duties and safeguarding responsibilities.

IROs are based at River Park House, co located with the social work staff..

The IRO Team has been through a period of significant changes. In October 2015 the post of Service Manager (managing IROs and CPAs) was permanently appointed to. In December 2015 the interim Head of Service left the department and a permanent Head of Service started in May 2016. In April 2015, a review of all children's service posts recommended that 2 IRO posts could be deleted, the review of foster carers was moved to the responsibility of the fostering and adoption service.

The IRO service has the following staff:

- 1 permanent Service manager for IROs and CPAs from October 2015
- 7.5 IROs (6.5 permanent, 1 interim)

Inevitably, the staffing changes outlined above have impacted on the continuity that some looked after children and young people have experienced.

The service also operates a multi functional administration service which responds to the administration needs of IROs. This includes sending out invitations and consultation documents and the distribution of LAC Review meeting minutes.

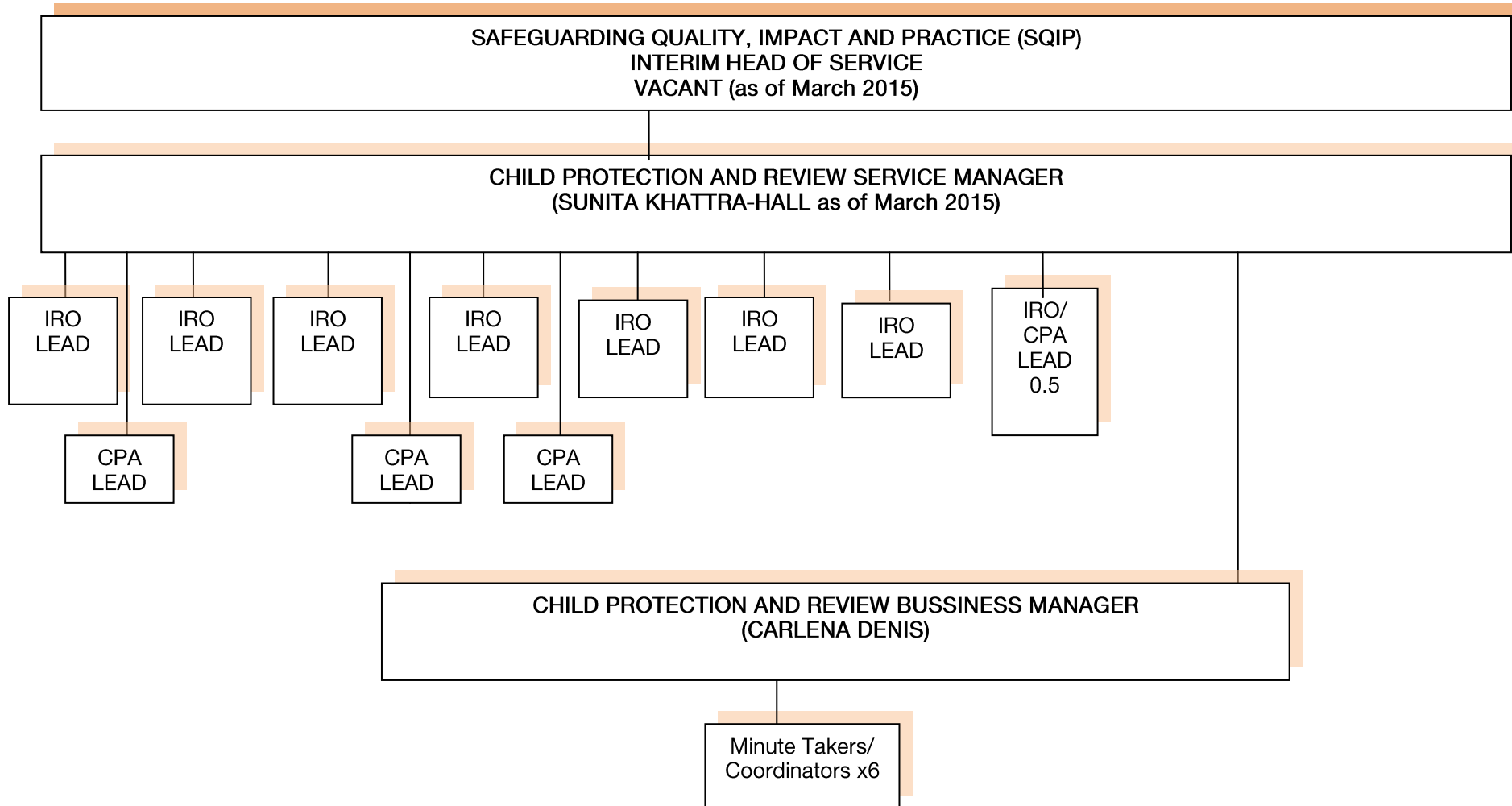
Ethnicity and Gender of IRO Staff:

IROs are at an equivalent grade to Team Managers and are all qualified and registered Social Workers. All 8 IROs work full time. The IRO Service has a diverse ethnic and gender profile as follows;

- 2 white males
- 1 white female
- 1 Asian male (part time post)
- 1 African Caribbean female
- 1 African female
- 1 white European male
- 1 white European female

This is broadly representative of Haringey Looked after population (Black British, White, European and Asian) in respect of ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. However, it is not representative in respect of the gender as Haringey have more looked after males than females.

IRO Service 2015/2016 Structure:



Quantitative information

Key Messages

The Looked After Child (LAC) population for 2015 – 2016 has reduced from 458 to 407 and the overall trend has shown an reduction in LAC children and young people. IRO caseloads have been between 60 – 70 per IRO. This compares with the recommended case load of 50-70 as set out in the IRO Handbook. A total of 1067 Reviews were Chaired by IROs in the year ending 31st March 2015.

Half (50%) of children and young people who started to become looked after during 2015 – 2016 were aged 13-17 years old. This means that 50% of children who became looked after were aged 0-12 years old.

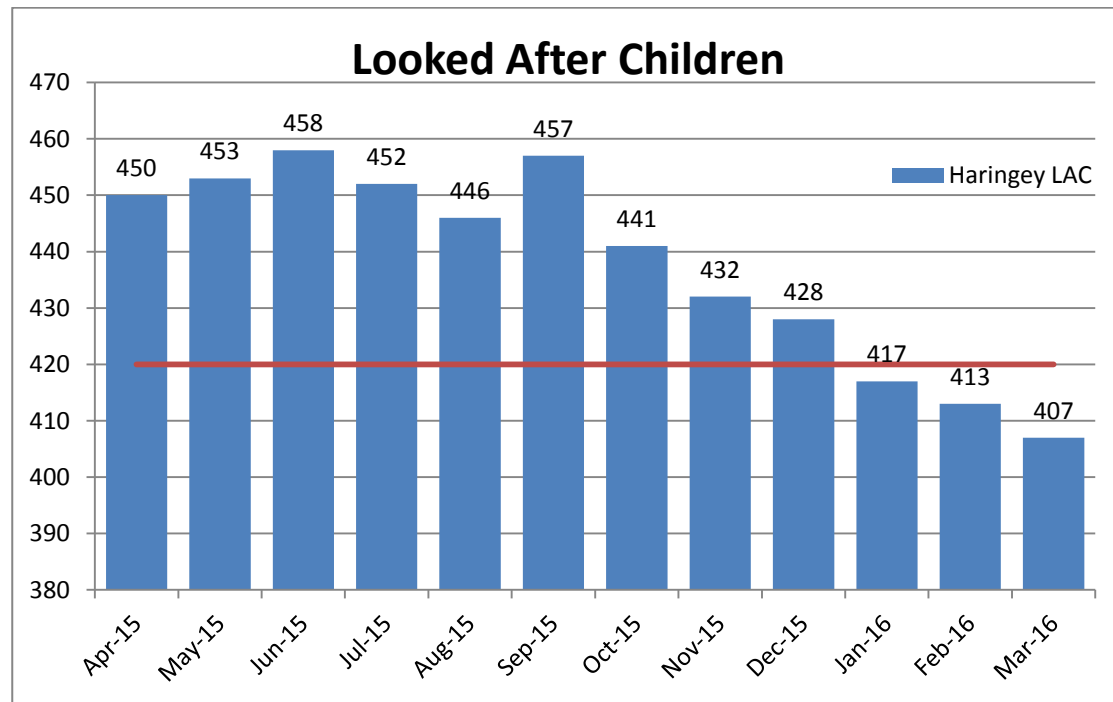
3 children with disabilities had looked after reviews in 2015/16. In these circumstances increased time and skill is required to ascertain the wishes and feelings of a child

In 2015/16 the majority of Reviews (92%) were held within timescale, this has improved from previous years, with last year LAC reviews held in timescales at 84.4%. Clear expectations are in place from the Service Manager that no LAC Reviews can be postponed or re-arranged once booked without the agreement of the Head of Service and that this will only be agree in exceptional circumstances. Clear guidance to manage review timescales, in line with the IRO guidance and best practice, has been provided to the all IROs by the Interim Head of Service and Interim Service Manager. The service plan requires that 100% of reviews in 2017/18 take place within timescale.

In terms of permanency outcomes during 2015/16:

- 8 children / young people were placed with a relative or friend
- 24 children were placed with adoptive parents
- 73 children / young people were rehabilitated home to the care of birth parents

Looked After Child population during 2015/16:



The bar chart above shows that between April 2014 to March 2015, the overall trend has been that LAC numbers have fallen from 458 to 407, with numbers peaking in June 2015 to 458. As of March 2015 Haringey LAC numbers were below that of statistical neighbours

The age profile of children and young people entering care during 2014 – 2015 is as follows::

- 13% of children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31st March 2015 were aged less than 1 year old
- 12% of children who started to be looked after were 1 to 4 years old
- 15% of children who started to be looked after were aged 5 to 9 years old
- 29% of young people who started to be looked after were aged 10 to 15 years old
- 30% of young people who started to be looked after were aged 16 years +

From last year's data the proportion of children becoming looked after over the age of 16+ has risen by 4%

This data for 2015/16 cannot be compared with statistical neighbours as comparative data is not as yet available.

The national benchmarking survey (December 2013) identified that the national average caseload for IROs ranged between 50 and 95. Within Haringey, IROs have had caseloads of between 60 - 70 in 2015 - 2016. The IRO caseloads included looked after children and young people who were;

- Children with disabilities
- Young adults
- Young people remanded into care
- Children and young people placed in foster care placements and residential care, including with in-house and independent fostering agency foster carers and with private and voluntary residential providers
- Children and young people made subject to a Special Guardianship Order
- Children who were adopted
- Young people subject to Secure Accommodation Reviews placed under s25 of the CA 1989

291 looked after children and young people were placed in placements outside of the local authority area (71% of the LAC population) this resulted in IROs spending a significant period of their working week travelling away from the borough / office. This impacted on their capacity to complete other IRO duties including, ongoing monitoring and visits to looked after children and young people in line with the IRO guidance.

There is an expectation that IROs do not only fulfil their role as part of the LAC Reviewing process but also add value to the care planning process in the following ways;

- Visit child / young person prior to the 1st review and continue to consult in between reviews
- Monitor the ongoing care and placement planning which includes the completion of mid way reviews
- Scrutinise the Local Authority's care planning process and be mindful about how the Local Authority meets its corporate parenting responsibilities. Initially any concerns are raised informally but in the event that no response, or an insufficient response, is received these issues are raised formally through the DRP.
- Challenge LAC care standards issues in a manner that will achieve the best outcomes for children and young people which is outlined in "Managing LAC Standards" guidance.

Therefore, it is important to note that the size of caseload alone does not indicate the workload of an IRO.

Permanency Outcomes

During 2014 - 2015, the majority of children have achieved permanency through reaching young adult hood or by returning home.

The permanency profile for children and young people leaving care in the year 31st March 2015 includes:

- 36% returned home to live with parents/relatives.
- 45% ceased to be looked after as a result of reaching adulthood
- 9% were adopted
- 8% became subject of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO)
- 1% went into custody
- 1% accommodated via a court ordered remand, ended

IROs have identified a number of practice issues in relation to permanency planning and these are outline below:

- Children / young people are not being formally matched in long standing private and voluntary (P&V) foster placements
- Delay and drift in SGO packages being agreed
- The revocation of Care Orders not happening in a timely manner

Timeliness of reviews

92% of Looked After Reviews took place within the statutory timescales. IROs completed some reviews in a series of meetings to ensure that relevant people were involved and so that the meeting remained child-focused and friendly. Clear guidance is in place to ensure that convening a series of meetings is not used as a vehicle to keep reviews in timescale. Although the timeliness of LAC reviews has not reached our target of 100%, this is an improving performance on previous years which as 82% in 2012-13, 86% in 2103-14 and 84.4% 2014-15.

Entitlements and Advocacy

As part of their pathway plan review process all care leavers in Haringey are provided with information regarding their entitlements in order to help and assist young people stay in education, employment and training up until the age of 21 years. The level of support provided is dependent on the level of assessed need.

All care leavers in Haringey who are in receipt of / or claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) are provided with support via DWP and a work coach to assist them in negotiating the transition into employment and a chosen career. This is explained to each care leaver initially when making a JSA claim.

CYPS policy is to provide each young person with a copy of their needs assessment and subsequent pathway plan.

The IRO continues to chair a final Pathway Plan Review and at this review entitlements are considered and confirmed

At the present time however, there is no established IRO mechanism for capturing if children / young people are receiving the appropriate entitlements or advice about their entitlements. Going forward a formal mechanism will be established so that IROs will be able to report any concerning cases where young people have not received these entitlements and the outcome for how these matters were resolved.

Qualitative information - achievements and impact of IRO service

Children and young people's participation, feedback and views in and outside of the reviews:

Out of 1067, 113 children were under 4 so they could not convey their views. Out of the 954 LAC reviews for children above the age of 4 (97%) of children and young people participated in their Reviews for the year ending 31st March 2015. Participation includes attending and / or contributing to their Review.

IROs have supported and encouraged older young people in chairing their own review or setting their own agendas wherever appropriate.

Since March 2015 through observation and file review, the IRO Service Manager IROs has noted the following good practice;

- The child / young person remains the focus of the review record and his or her views are represented.
- The child is spoken to alone if appropriate and if he / she attends
- The IRO explained the care plan in a sensitive and appropriate manner dependent on the Childs age and understanding.

The child's voice

As well as chairing their LAC Review Meetings, IROs stay in contact with their allocated looked after children and young people by have contact via telephone, text or letters and undertake visits. Contact is made by the IRO both prior LAC Review Meetings and in between LAC Reviews at the midway point. The IRO Service Manager has completed observed the majority of IROs chairing of LAC Reviews Meetings and has seen evidence of good direct work with looked after children and young people. Within LAC Review records the child and young person's journey is well presented which helps to maintain an accurate account of developments and keeps their life story alive.

One of the key areas for development concerns the consultation process for looked after children to ensure that their views, wishes and feelings are ascertained and taken into account through the whole journey through care, including their experience of their social worker. Weaknesses outside the review meeting itself have been noted in the existing method for consulting looked after children and young people and feedback has not been ascertained consistently or robustly enough.

The process is currently dependent on posting a consultation document to looked after children and young people so that they can complete this for consideration by the IRO ahead of the LAC Review Meeting. It has been accepted that the consultation method does not engage looked after children and young people consistently well, is not particularly child friendly and needs to be improves.

Viewpoint is an online software that will capture the views of looked after children. Training for social workers and administrators has been delivered in March 2016 and viewpoint was launched in April 2016.

Quality of Care Planning

IROs continued to monitor Care and Pathway Plans and during the reporting year 2014 to 2015 with 90% (up from 67% in 2014 – 2015) of children having an up to date care plan and 81% (up from 47% in 2014-2015) of young people having an up to date Pathway Plan. The practice standard sets out a clear expectation that all looked after children and young people will have an up to date Care, and where appropriate a Pathway Plans and this has been a significant and persistent performance priority which has the subject of a targeted improvement action plan.

The IRO Team has however been concerned about the low number of children having up to date Care and Plan. Many strategies have been attempted to both support performance improvement and challenge any drift and delay as a result of written Care and Pathway Plans not being up to date or inappropriate decisions being made. The statutory review process is based on having up to date plans and care planning. Analysis of this performance issue has identified staff turnover, workforce instability and high caseloads as underlying workforce factors.

To counter the potential risks associated with this practice issue for individual looked after children and young people, IROs have made sure that clear care planning discussions have occurred prior to and within reviews meetings. IROs have also made a record on Mosaic case notes and escalated issues to the Team and Service Managers. This action aims to acknowledge the efforts that are being made to stabilise and strengthen the workforce within the Children in Care Teams whilst working to establish a clear understanding about relevant Care and Pathway Planning issues. This action doesn't indicate an acceptance of sub-standard practice and it is anticipated that performance will continue to improve as workforce stability and permanency are addressed.

Personal Education Plans and Health Assessments

IROs have reviewed education and health planning processes as part of the LAC Review process. Personal Education Plans (PEP) and Health Assessments (HA) feed into the review process and are routinely completed and considered to ensure that needs are identified, plans for intervention and support are put in place so that they can be monitored and reviewed over time. As at 31st March 2016 performance was as follows:

- 89% of looked after children / young people had an up to date PEP
- 97% of looked after children / young people had an up to date HA

This is an improvement from previous years performance which was 62% and 94% respectively.

The Service Manager has attended Health operational Meetings and continues to work closely both at an operational and strategic level to ensure that LAC health needs are identified and addressed.

Management oversight

The revised statutory guidance states that operational social work managers must consider the recommendations from the LAC Review before they are finalised as decisions. This is due in part to the need to ensure that any resource implications have been fully considered and addressed as well as wanting to ensure management agreement. Once the recommendations are completed the Manager has 5 days to raise any queries or objections before they are endorsed and agreed as the LAC Review decisions.

IROs have routinely produced LAC Review recommendations within 5 working days for consideration by social work managers. More recently, this process has been developed and formalised within guidance endorsed by the Heads of Service and Service Managers whereby IROs send their recommendations in an email to Team Managers while copying in the relevant Service Manager. Team managers respond within a further 5 working days, after 10 working days these recommendations become confirmed decisions. It is anticipated that any disputes are resolved within the initial 10 working days.

Quality Assurance

Identifying good practice, problem resolution and escalation

IROs have routinely given verbal feedback and confirmed via emails both good case work practice and practice that has not met appropriate practice standards. There is a culture of celebrating good practice and learning through critical challenge and reflective practice.

As part of this developing strong practice based culture, the CYPS Dispute Resolution Procedure (DRP) was refreshed and re launched in February 2015.

Refreshed Dispute Resolution Procedure:

The revised Dispute Resolution Procedure (DRP) was launched by CYPS on the 9th February 2015. Since this time the IROs and CPAs have raised both **informal** concerns and **formal** disputes.

These have been raised under the following categories:

- Management decision making
- Care / protection assessment and planning
- Provision of services / resources
- Practice standards
- Working together with multi-agency/disciplinary partners (nb: unresolved safeguarding issues raised by CYPS with partners should also be raised formally via the LSCB)

- Child / Parent /Carer's views, wishes and feelings

The expectation is that the DRP should be activated by the IRO in their role as a champion of LAC (and by CPAs for children subject to a Child Protection Plan) and as part of their role as a critical friend to the service. A summary of DRP activity is as follows:

DRP Analysis

There were 5 formal DRP's that were initiated in 2015 – 2016. All 5 related to young people that were between 16 and 18 and the issues were primarily around the entitlement to a package of support for the young person

The IROs have many informal discussions with team managers regarding practice issues in terms of care planning for children and young people and this activity can be seen on the case file. Out of the 458 looked after children the IROs had generated activity on 330 children. This ranged from issues around permanency, quality assurance of care and adoption packages and contact issues but did not reach the DRP criteria.

Supervision and training

IROs have scheduled one to one reflective supervision at least every four weeks (on a monthly basis) as per the CYPS supervision policy and can obtain management advice, guidance and support on an ad hoc basis when required. There are fortnightly IRO & CPA Meetings and a bi-monthly Service Meeting.

IROs have met with CAFCASS to discuss ongoing practice standards and developments including implementation of the Public Law Outline and relevant case law.

IROs also attended group reflective supervision sessions which concentrated on the following issues;

- Case presentations
- Implementing SOS
- Endorsement / non endorsement of care plans
- Chairing meetings and the use of appropriate authority

All individual case discussions are placed on the relevant child and young person's electronic (Mosaic) file under either 'IRO reflective supervisions' or 'IRO management decisions' which evidences decision making within the IRO service and strengthens IRO practice.

Overview and Summary

The Ofsted (2014) inspection highlighted the need to strengthen and improve the IRO services for looked after children and young people which would enable CYPS to achieve a “good” judgement. As a response to this feedback the IRO Service has started an improvement journey in order to strengthen its own practice as well as developing its ability to provide challenge and support to CYPS in relation to care planning and corporate parenting responsibilities. Whilst the role of the IRO can be uncomfortable, especially when challenging practice within the department, it is important that CYPS embraces this aspect of the service as a valuable contribution to ensuring that the needs of looked after children and young people are championed and promoted.

The IRO Service has brought rigour and challenge to care planning practice for looked after children and young people in the following ways:

- Challenging placement moves which are not in the best interest of the child / young person
- Challenging drift and delay through use of informal and formal DRP
- Working with both Social Workers and Virtual School staff to improve PEP compliance and quality
- Supporting and critically challenging the quality and compliance of individual Care Plans
- Monitoring LAC activity to ensure that the right children are recorded as ‘in care’ at the right time through monthly reports
- Monitoring children who cease to be looked after to ensure that the decision is made in their best interest as part of the LAC Review process or is at least decided in consultation with the IRO
- Using the LAC Review process for placements that are at risk of breaking down
- Learning from shared practice through reflective group supervision
- Ensuring that IRO case specific reflective supervision and management decisions are placed on the child’s file
- Inviting the IRO Service Manager to sit on the Permanency Tracking Panel meeting and the Resource Panel to add rigour and challenge

Although there has been significant progress at pace within the IRO Service where the IRO has increasingly provided more rigour and challenge during the course of 2015/16, the following areas of development remain a priority to improve outcomes for looked after children and young people:

1. Consulting with children / young people to improve ways in which their views, wishes and feelings are ascertained and acted upon
2. Adding further rigour and challenge to care planning issues in respect of the following:
 - Ensuring permanency plans are in place at the second LAC Review to avoid unnecessary drift and delay
 - Ensuring appropriate Special Guardianship support plans are approved and in place in a timely manner
 - Ensuring the process for agreeing matches for looked after children and young people living in established long term independent fostering agency placements is clarified and acted upon in a timely manner
 - Ensuring the timely revocation of Placement Orders when necessary and appropriate
 - Ensuring the timely revocation of Care Orders where necessary and appropriate
- Implementing a robust system for recording entitlements and advocacy and pursuing advocacy where required
- Embedding the IROs use of authority to record whether proposed Care Plans are endorsed, or not
- To provide quarterly reports for children and young people in respect of resolution of DRP activity, impact and outcomes

Annual work programme for April 2015 – March 2016

The IRO work plan is outlined as follows:

- Applying and embedding Signs of Safety model to chairing and recording LAC Reviews that are understood by children, young people and their families
- Increase engagement of children and young people in care planning decision making and feedback on service delivery
- Reflective team and individual supervision and observation of practice, to develop the IRO skills of analysis and quality assurance role.
- IROs acting as a critical friend to challenge and support practice and improve mid way reviews in between LAC Review Meetings.
- IRO to see all children and young people prior to the 1st Review and consult with each young person within the spirit of the IRO guidance
- To improve children's feedback via Viewpoint

Appendix A



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