



## INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE 2012 – 2013

### ANNUAL REPORT

An annual report of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service for Bromley's Looked After Children.

The report contains a summary of the work completed by Bromley Independent Reviewing Officers between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013

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## Introduction

1. The IRO Handbook contains the statutory guidance for IRO's and Local Authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of Looked After Children (LAC). It states that the IRO Manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board.
2. This report provides an opportunity to highlight good practice and areas which require improvement, identify emerging themes and trends, describes areas of work which the service has prioritised during the year and future plans. The information could be used to inform commissioning plans.

## Legal Context of the Service

3. The Regulations require a child to have a named IRO within 5 days of becoming Looked After and should remain that child's IRO for the duration of their being Looked After. It also requires that if there is a sibling group, the IRO should be the same, but if a parent and child are both LAC, they should have separate IROs.
4. The Bromley IRO service has a 100% performance outcome in providing a named IRO within 5 days, and in most cases the IRO is allocated within 2 days of a child being looked after. Due to the stability of the IRO team, we have been able to ensure they have kept the same named IRO and for most children, they have had the same IRO for a significant number of years.
5. The statutory duties of the IRO are as follows:
  - monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case
  - participate in any review of the child's case
  - ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority
  - perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations
6. The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child. As corporate parents each local authority should act for the children they look after as a responsible and conscientious parent would act.

7. Team meetings held monthly are also used for IRO's to share and discuss patterns of concern emerging and take action; an example being Life story books and later life letters for children being adopted was delaying adopters making their applications to court. This was addressed with legal and LAC team manager who now have implemented a process to ensure the delay is prevented in making the application and having the required paperwork completed in a timely manner and the IRO's agreed a process of earlier decision making at a matched child's Lac review to ensure the work was completed within a specific timescale. The outcome of this was evidenced in the improved adoption performance this year.
8. As part of the monitoring function, the IRO also has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. This should include identifying patterns of concern emerging not just around individual children but also more generally in relation to the collective experience of its looked after children of the services they receive.
9. Where IROs identify more general concerns around the quality of the authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should immediately alert senior managers about these. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice. Bromley IRO's regularly give feedback to social workers and their managers in relation to the social workers reports and their work with children and families, identifying good practice to be shared within the teams. Where there are concerns with a social worker or carers practice or behaviour, the IRO will inform the appropriate group manager and if not resolved will use the formal escalation process.

### **The Independent Reviewing Team**

10. The IROs are employed by the London Borough of Bromley; they are line managed by a Quality Assurance Group Manager and as required by the statutory guidance, they have a separate line management from the children's Safeguarding, LAC and LCT services.
11. From April 2012 there have been 5 full-time IROs. One IRO left the service but was replaced by an internal candidate, initially as a secondment and then as a permanent post. This ensured a planned transfer of the case load from one IRO to another.
12. The statutory guidance recommends that a caseload of 50 to 70 looked after children for a full time equivalent IRO, would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service, including the full range of functions set out in the handbook. Due to an increase in LAC numbers the average caseload for IROs has risen from 50-55 in 2011/12 to 60 in 2012/13. The caseload management has to take in consideration of the distances of placements as well as size of sibling groups and age ranges. The National

and London IRO Manager networks has identified that managing cases loads of over 60 has a significant impact on the IRO's ability to fulfil the full requirements of the statutory guidance.

### **ACTIVITY OF THE SERVICE AND INDIVIDUAL IRO's**

13. The legislation requires that when there is a placement move, the process of review timescales has to start again, requiring a LAC Review within 28 days, at 3 months and thereafter 6 monthly.

#### **Case Example**

*'a 14 year old young person who has significant emotional and behavioural difficulties and due to safeguarding concerns needed to be placed at a distance from London. A closure of a residential setting in the Lake District at short notice, followed by a bridging placement in Manchester and then a move to an appropriate long term residential placement in the Midlands, led to the IRO having to hold 6 Looked After Reviews in a period of one year rather than the more usual 3 per child in their first year and then twice a year thereafter if they are in a settled placement.'*

14. The number of individual children and young people's LAC reviews undertaken in 2012/13 was 852. Monthly activity is shown below and averages at 15 children's reviews per 20 working day month for each IRO without taking into consideration annual leave, statutory holidays and other duties required of the IRO within the service. Each IRO records the review decisions and report within the timescales required of 5 days for decisions and 15 days for the minutes. The Bromley IRO team have been able to meet these timescales consistently for the year 2012/13 in the majority of cases.

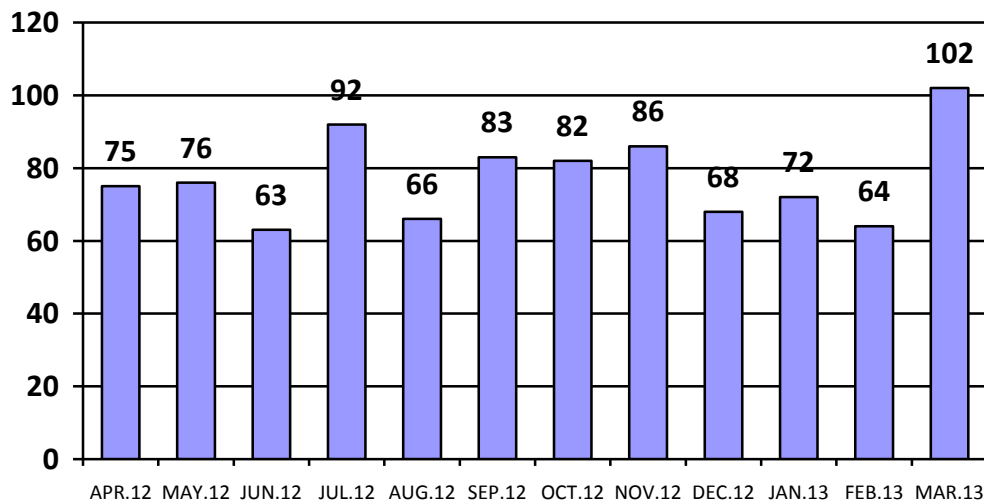


Figure 1 - Number of LAC reviews April 2013 - March 2013

15. In response to the 2012 Ofsted Safeguarding Inspection and the post Munro report emphasis on **SMART** care planning for children (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and with a **T**imescale); the IRO LAC decision and LAC review forms were revised and updated on Bromley's Integrated Children's System. In addition, the mid-point monitoring form was revised to focus on monitoring of the progression of the Care Plan, rather than an audit tool of social work practice. The IRO's continue to feedback to social worker and line managers on quality of practice outside of the monitoring process. Evidence of their implementation can be seen in their contribution to the improvement in this year's Bromley's permanency outcomes.
16. The IROs are also involved in undertaking themed audits (all five IRO's were involved in one of the four themed audits which take place over 3 days); processing Access to Files requests for adults previously in local authority care (the time these take depend on how long ago they were looked after, the period of being looked after and the complexity of the case) these are both part of the wider Quality Assurance function for the Service. From time to time they also chair Child Protection Conferences to cover sickness and holidays and undertake internal management reviews of cases.

**Case Example – Access to Files (approx. 8 hours' work in total)**

*'A 45 year old adult who was in Bromley's care between the ages of 12-16 requested access to his files in June 2012. The files were retrieved from Archives in both paper and microfiche form and are photo-copied and given to the IRO to prepare. The IRO went through the paper files and extracted any information not pertaining to the adult, this was difficult because they were looked after with a sibling and many recordings at that time were relating to both children. 3<sup>rd</sup> party information has to be processed to gain agreement to share if before a certain date.*

*The IRO then contacted the adult who was in the process of moving. They said they would contact the IRO in a month, but nothing was heard from them for another 6 months. This is not unusual for adult previously looked after, as the actuality of what they might find is often daunting. The files were returned to Archives and then the adult made contact again.*

*A office appointment was made for them to come in and with the support of the IRO they were able to view their records and come to an understanding of the reasons for being in care. The reason this adult had requested their file was they now had children of their own and felt they needed to understand their own childhood experiences in order to be a better parent than they felt they were.*

17. One key to the success in meeting the requirements in legislation for the IRO service in Bromley is the efficiency of the business support team in the Quality Assurance Unit. There are two full time business support officers who have responsibility for the allocation, setting up of reviews, maintaining the electronic systems for the child and also have responsibility for the arrangements for medical and dental appointments including adoption medicals. They send out the invites and review reminders, send out the minutes of the reviews and liaise with the IRO, allocated social workers, carers, parents and CAFCASS (for Children's Guardians appointed to children in Care Proceedings) ensuring that reviews are kept within statutory timescales and reports are provided within the required timescales.
18. The IRO Handbook Statutory Guidance was issued by the Government in March 2010. Although all of Bromley's IRO's are experienced social workers there was no specific training attached to its implementation. The Ofsted Safeguarding Inspection in 2012 identified strengths in the IRO service but also areas for improvement. Bromley commissioned training for the IROs for early 2013 to support improving the effectiveness of the IRO in progressing the care plan, monitoring, decision making and challenge processes.

19. The Bromley IRO manager attends the London IRO Manager's Group and as Chair of the London group, the Bromley manager has taken a lead role in developing a network to share good practice, liaise with Ofsted and provide training for IRO's across London. Following the successful IRO Practitioners conference in June 2012, the event has become annual rather than bi-annual. This year the conference will be hosted by Merton and will have presentations on 'Care Enquiry' research; Sexual Exploitation: Risks for Looked after Children; Lambeth Placement Stability project and 'Once proceedings are over' Role of the IRO. Three IRO's from Bromley will be attending. A Bromley IRO also regularly attends the London IRO practitioners group.

20. The Bromley IRO manager is also a representative for the London IRO Manager's group at the National IRO/DfE group which works with the DfE in research and projects which promote good practice and better outcomes for children in care. In April this year, the Bromley manager was chosen by the National IRO group to give a presentation to Edward Timpson, Minister for Looked After Children on the role of the IRO and the IRO Manager's network. The group continues to be involved in the Family Justice Review; protocols between CAFCASS and the IRO services and consultation on the Children and Families Bill.

### **The children in our care**

21. The child in care population over the last five years has increased by 16% from 2009 to 2013, though with some fluctuation between years. These are 'snapshot' figures from March 31<sup>st</sup> of each year.

| <b>2009</b> | <b>2010</b> | <b>2011</b> | <b>2012</b> | <b>2013</b> |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 247         | 285         | 266         | 272         | 286         |

22. 44% of children are placed outside of the borough, this has risen 2% since 2011/12 but it continues to include placements from surrounding authorities i.e. Kent, Croydon, Lewisham and Greenwich. These are less than 20 mile radius from LB Bromley and primarily are in-house or independent foster carer homes. 16% of placements outside of the borough are residential placements and all these are for children who have complex needs due to disability, significant emotional and behavioural difficulties or are in secure accommodation.

### Case Example

*'14 year old male subject to neglect and sexual abuse as a child, was placed in a therapeutic setting for several years but began to display sexualised and sexually predatory behaviour as a 12 year old; a specialist placement which offered treatment was identified but sadly before treatment was able to address his behaviours, he committed a serious sexual offence and is currently in a specialist secure unit serving a 3 year sentence. This unit is in Darlington, one of only two specialist units for young people in England – the joint work of the Social Worker, YOT worker and the IRO and their commitment to ensuring the right placement and treatment for this child whilst serving his sentence was recommended to the Judge contributed to the best outcome for this young man and his future'*

23. At the end of March the ethnic make-up of the children who have ethnic origins other than white had increased from 26% to 36% from the previous year. This remains a higher representation of black children in care than reflected in the population. Children's Social Care investigated this increase with the support of Public Health and reported back to the Bromley Safeguarding Board. The outcome of the investigation identified Bromley as a large borough with both rural and inner city wards. It identified that the statistical % is not a concern when relating the figures to the individual wards where there is a higher % of ethnic minority groups. i.e. Penge wards.
24. Children's social care has a Permanency policy and Management strategy to increase permanency and in 2011 the management team implemented an initiative to improve permanency planning outcomes for looked after children and young people in Bromley. This initiative was supported by the IRO manager leading on the monitoring of permanency planning arrangements for all children's care plans to ensure they were progressed and chased across the service.
25. Following its implementation, in 2012/13 improved outcomes were evidenced with 17 children being adopted, 10 of those children within 12 months of their Care Orders being made. 10 children were matched and placed in pre-adoptive placements and 7 children made subject to SGOs (this is where a member of the extended family is granted Parental Responsibility). In addition, a permanency monitoring programme has substantially increased the numbers of children having their long term fostering placements identified and agreed. This continues to be a significant improvement from previous years.



## **Children and Young People's participation**

26. In last year's annual report two areas for future development relating to Children and young people's participation were identified:

### **Developing relationships between the IRO and the Child**

27. National Government focus groups with looked after children are still finding that they do not have sufficient confidence in the IRO role in supporting their wishes and views and can't always name their IRO. Through IRO team meetings and individual supervision IROs have been exploring ways to develop their communication with children and young people. In conjunction with the Living in Care Council the LAC pack now has a dedicated section on the IRO and every child who becomes looked after has an age appropriate information leaflet on the role of the IRO and their contact numbers.
28. There is an IRO action plan with a target of more young people over the age of 12 years chairing their reviews when appropriate and looking at creative ways of ensuring their participation is meaningful and they feel their wishes and feelings are being listened too. Currently it is our ambition to aim for a target of 80% of young people over the age of 12 years chairing their LAC reviews by 2014/15. With this ambition, two IRO's are working closely with the Living in Care Council to develop training for young people in chairing their meetings, it has been agreed that this training will take place twice yearly facilitated by older looked after young people experienced in chairing and the IRO chairs. This initiative will also improve outcomes for our looked after young people in life skills and decision making as they move into adulthood and independency.

### **Working with the Living in Care Council (LinC)**

29. Establishing a regular link with LinC has been a slower process as they have been busy with the promotion of the Bromley Pledge and producing DVD's for children who come into care and professionals working with looked after children. The IRO manager attended two LinC meetings in the last year and we have agreed that an IRO and manager will meet with the council twice a year and by invitation at other meetings if requested.

In addition there are two IROs who will be working with LinC in 2013 to develop feedback processes for children leaving care and training for young people in chairing their meetings.

## **The Review Process**

30. 96.1% of children's reviews have been held within statutory timescales, this is a significant improvement from 88% in 2011/12. The remaining 3% of reviews were due to a sibling group of children where a review had to be

cancelled due to winter weather conditions and was unable to be reconvened within the required timescale.

31. The statutory guidance states that IROs should undertake mid-way monitoring of the Care Plan for their allocated children. Following the 2012 Safeguarding Inspection, the IRO service reviewed its QA monitoring forms and a new monitoring form was introduced which ensures that progressing the Care Plan is the focus of this process. Making this change has enabled the IRO's to be able to identify and prioritise progressing the care plans of the more vulnerable children and young people on their case load.

### **Case Example**

*'a sibling group of three children, all with disabilities placed together with in-house foster carers in a neighbouring authority – two of the children required specialist education provision and the social worker was finding it difficult to progress the identification of suitable provision with two education departments being involved. The IRO's monitoring of these children's care plans meant that she was able to intervene at an earlier time, offering their support to the social worker and also communicating with the education departments with their statutory authority as the IRO to ensure placements were identified within a set timescale. Having the children placed as early as possible in suitable education provision means an improvement in the outcomes for these children's education and social development.'*

32. The legislation states that every child should have a LAC review before leaving care. However, some children return home unexpectedly either by choice or by court order, in these situations we have agreed that the IRO will chair a 'Planning Meeting' as soon as possible following the child's return home to ensure a robust plan supports the child's ongoing needs.

### **Problem Solving**

33. All authorities are required to have in place a procedure for escalating concerns. In Bromley there is a process for escalating concerns between IROs and the Local Authority if the IRO has more serious concerns about the progress of the care plan and has not been able to resolve the issue informally with the case holding manager. The formal escalation process is initiated by the IRO and cannot be ended until the IRO is satisfied that the concern has been appropriately addressed and resolved. There is a written escalation procedure which includes templates for the IRO to complete for each stage of the process.
34. The implementation of the mid-point monitoring has also been successful in identifying delay in progressing care plans earlier so that the need for a formal escalation has reduced. The table below shows the reduction in escalations from the previous year. This year 5 escalations concerned 'significant decisions not completed' where personal education; placement;

pathway and transition plans had not been completed. The remaining 4 escalations concerned 'drift in care planning' where children were awaiting either education placements or appropriate accommodation for their needs whilst in temporary placements.

|   | 2011/12 | 2012/13 |
|---|---------|---------|
| Total no. of children where issues have been escalated                                | 14      | 9       |
| Total no. of children where issues were escalated to the Deputy Manager and resolved  | 11      | 7       |
| Total no. of children where issues were escalated to the Group Manager and resolved   | 2       | 2       |
| Total no. of children where issues were escalated to the Head of Service and resolved | 1       | 0       |
| Total no. of children where issues were escalated to the Assistant Director           | 0       | 0       |
| Total no. of children where issues were escalated to CAFCASS*                         | 0       | 0       |

35. Ofsted has just completed a Thematic Audit on the role on IRO services and the role of the IRO which was published on the 17<sup>th</sup> May. One of the key headlines of the report stated 'evidence that IROs oversight of Care plans is not sufficiently robust and they didn't always challenge effectively'. Therefore, it is intended to review our thresholds for challenge in this coming year.

### **Safeguarding children and young people in our care**

36. The statutory requirements for the IRO in relation to safeguarding are found in 3.40 of the IRO Handbook.

*'In most cases where a child who is the subject of a child protection plan becomes looked after it will no longer be necessary to maintain the child protection plan. There are however a relatively few cases where safeguarding issues will remain and a looked after child should also have a child protection plan. These cases are likely to be where a local authority obtains an interim care order in family proceedings but the child who is the subject of a child protection plans remains at home, pending the outcome of the final hearing, or where a child's behaviour is likely to result in significant harm to themselves or others.*

*Where a looked after child remains the subject of a child protection plan it is expected that there will be a single planning and reviewing process, led*

*by the IRO, which meets the requirements of both the Regulations and the guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children'*

37. In 2012/13 52 children were subject to joint CP/LAC plans, the majority of these children had the CP Plan removed at the first or second Review as they are safeguarded by either the court process or no longer in the care of their parents. At the end of March 2013 there were 6 children who remained subject to joint CP and LAC plans.
38. The IRO will ensure child protection concerns that are raised within the reviewing and monitoring process are dealt with appropriately. Examples of these incidents in the last year have ranged from risk of sexual exploitation and gang affiliation to concerns of inadequate accommodation and emotional abuse suffered by children in extended contact arrangements with a parent.

### **Progress against service developments identified for 2012/13**

39. In the 2011/12 IRO Annual report a number of service developments were identified for 2012/13. The progress of these developments is as follows:
40. To improve outcomes for children and young people by developing the relationship between the IRO and their engagement with children and young people; Working with the Living in Care Council and Enabling the participation of children and young people in their review process and Care Plans. This has been addressed under children and young people's participation in this report.
41. Link with the Corporate Parenting – The Annual Report has been presented to both the Corporate Parenting Board and the Bromley Safeguarding Childrens Board (BSCB) – the BSCB asked that safeguarding issues for Looked after Children is addressed more explicitly in future Reports and has been addressed in this year's Annual Report.
42. Input into improving social work practice: Two Themed Audits were undertaken in 2012/13 on the Looked After Children (LAC) and Leaving Care Teams (LCT) which identified areas for improvement in providing robust Care Plans that were meaningful and understood by young people. Actions Plans from these audits will be taken forward into 2013/14 provided additional support and training to the teams.
43. Permanency Monitoring Function – This was introduced in 2011 and continues to make a significant contribution to improving outcomes for looked after children in reducing the timescales for permanency in adoption and long term fostering placements.

## **Future Service Developments for implementation for the IRO Service in 2013/14**

44. The IRO Service will continue to improve their relationships and working partnerships with stakeholders. The IRO service will have a 'stall' at the Market Place event for Looked After children and young people to promote understanding of the IRO role which will be attended by Looked After children and young people, their carers and other professionals.
  
45. Two themed audits for Looked After and Leaving Care Services in 2012/13 identified two areas for improvement in the IRO service. Providing a more consistent recording of SMART review decisions and being more ambitious in the long term decision making for young people. A Peer Review of our Care Practice in May 2013 gave a key message to the IRO service that there was a need to continue improvements to IRO practice and increase clarity of their accountabilities to support improvement in basic practice. There will be additional training and support to the IROs in 2013/14 with an action plan for improvement in place by June 2013.

Susan Webb May 2013