

# **INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO) SERVICE**

## **ANNUAL REPORT**

**2016-2017**

**An Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service  
for Bromley's Children Looked After**

**The report contains a summary of the work completed by Bromley  
Independent Reviewing Officers between  
1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017**

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## Contents

### Page

1	Introduction	3
2	Role and Function of the Service	3
3	Independent Reviewing Team	4
4	Profile of Children Looked After in Bromley: 2016-17	5
5	Activity of the IRO Service	6
6	The Children in our Care	7
7	Children and Young People's Participation	8
8	Impact of the IRO Service on Outcomes for Children and Young People	10
9	Making a Significant Contribution to Service Improvement for Looked After Children	10
10	Quality Assurance of the Independent Reviewing Service	11
11	Recruiting and Retaining Skilled and Knowledgeable Staff	11
12	Safeguarding Children and Young People in our Care	12
13	Progress on Developments for 2015-16	12
14	Areas for Continued Development in 2017-18	13

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Independent Review Officers' (IRO) role in Bromley is subject to continued improvement following the Ofsted single inspection in April 2016. This report is written in context of the overall Improvement Plan and details work undertaken in 2016-17 and objectives for 2017-18. The service is committed to achieving best outcomes for children and young people in Bromley.
- 1.2 The IRO service is set within the framework of the IRO Handbook; linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were updated June 2015. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the review process to a wider overview of the case; including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children looked after and in challenging drift and delay.
- 1.3 This report provides a summary of how the IRO service monitors the performance of the local authority in relation to its children looked after. It summarises the development of the IRO Service over the past year and provides statistical analysis of the performance of the service in relation to Bromley's children looked after population. It highlights good practice and areas which require improvement for the year ahead.

## 2. Role and Function of the Service

- 2.1 Since 2004 all local authorities have been required to appoint IROs to protect children's interests through the care planning process. The requirement to appoint IROs arose from concerns that the care planning for looked after children could 'drift'. IROs must be independent from the immediate line management of the case. The effectiveness of their role has subsequently been questioned as to whether they can be sufficiently robust in their challenge of the local authority. Therefore, an attempt was made to strengthen the IRO role through statutory guidance and the IRO Handbook.
- 2.2 The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extended the IROs' responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to only a child's *review* to the more encompassing role of monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's *case*.
- 2.3 The Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) Act 2012 came into force on 1/12/12. As a result, all young people aged 16 and 17 who are remanded into custody are now regarded as looked after children. During 2016/17 there were 8 young men and 1 young woman on remand.
- 2.4 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. The IRO should highlight 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 children looked after of the services they receive. The IROs therefore consult with the social work team and manager on any identified issues arising from the care plan or implementation of the care plan; where necessary escalating unresolved concerns to an appropriate level in the local authority's management structure, and/or if necessary to CAF/CASS.
- 2.5 The main forum through which the IRO carries out their monitoring role is the statutory looked after reviews.

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 requests one
- When significant events occur

2.6 The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs. The actions set out in the plan should be 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.

2.7 The review should, wherever possible, take place at the child's placement with the attendees being the people most closely involved with the child; and those people the children want to be in attendance. Parents, residential workers, foster carers and their support workers, social worker and the IRO are the expected attendees. Reports from other professionals such as Education and Health (including CAMHS) are also received. In some circumstances to ensure sensitivity to children and parents, it may be necessary to hold a series of meetings to facilitate all views to be heard (e.g. where a child does not want their parents or another professional to attend a review).

### 3. Independent Reviewing Team

3.1 The IROs are employed by the London Borough of Bromley. They are line-managed by a Quality Improvement Group Manager. The Head of Quality Improvement Service reports to the Director of Children's Social Care. As required by statutory guidance, their management is independent of the immediate case-management of Bromley's children looked after.

3.2 Since April 2016 the staffing establishment has been 5.5 full-time IROs. The guidance states: The IRO should be an authoritative professional with at least equivalent status to an experienced Children's Social Work Team Manager:

- Bromley's IROs have extensive relevant social work experience
- There are four male and two female IROs
- There are three IROs from a BME background

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

- Meetings on individual cases
- Planning forums where policy and procedures are developed (e.g. health, education, participation and professional standards groups)
- Audit work
- Training
- Linking with teams
- Assisting with complaints and access to records requests
- Working with the commissioning team to monitor the quality of placements.

3.4 The team has representation in the following meetings:

- Corporate Parenting Group
- Health Forum
- Newly-implemented 18+ Panel

- Early Permanency Panel
- Placements Panel
- National IRO Network (attendance is on a rota basis)

- 3.5 Statutory guidance recommends that the caseload for a full-time IRO should be between 50 and 70 looked after children; to enable the delivery of a quality service. In 2016-17 each IRO has held a caseload of 55-60 children. Caseload management has to take into consideration the geographical location of placements and travelling time. The National and London IRO Manager networks have identified that caseloads exceeding 60 have a significant impact on the IRO's ability to fulfil the full requirements of the statutory guidance. Those authorities with significantly higher caseloads have been awarded inadequate judgements in the single inspection framework.
- 3.6 A child or young person coming into care will be allocated an IRO within 24 hours of placement. The IRO will then make contact with the allocated social worker and the child or young person. It is good practice for the IRO to visit the child before the day of the Review. The purpose of the visit is to introduce themselves, discuss the role of the IRO and the purpose of Reviews. The IROs attempt to achieve this whenever possible.
- 3.7 Ideally a child looked after will retain the same allocated IRO for their duration in care unless the IRO leaves the employment of the local authority. In exceptional circumstances there may be a change of IRO.

#### 4. Profile of Children Looked After in Bromley: 2016-17

Gender		
Bromley Residents 0-17yrs		Snapshot
Gender	Population	Children Looked After
Male	37,030 (51%)	167 (58%)
Female	35,840 (49%)	121 (42%)
Unborn	0	0
Unknown	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>72,870 (100%)</b>	<b>288 (100%)</b>

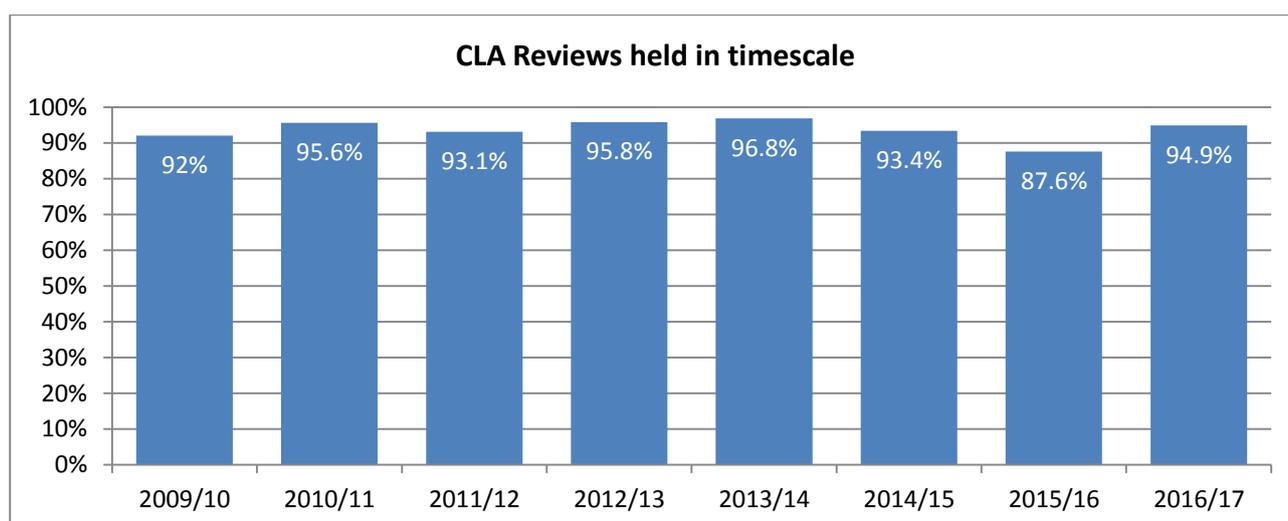
Age		
Bromley Residents 0-17yrs		Snapshot
Age	Population	Children Looked After
Unborn	0	0
0-4yrs	20,810 (29%)	40 (14%)
5-9yrs	21,940 (30%)	45 (16%)
10-12yrs	11,640 (16%)	53 (18%)
13-15yrs	10,880 (15%)	72 (25%)
16-17yrs	7,610 (10%)	78 (27%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>72,880 (100%)</b>	<b>288 (100%)</b>

Ethnicity		
Bromley Residents 0-17yrs		Snapshot
Ethnicity	Population	Children Looked After
Asian	5400 (7%)	8 (3%)
Black	12,040 (17%)	55 (19%)
Mixed		32 (11%)
Other	3,070 (4%)	3 (1%)
White British	52,370 (72%)	162 (56%)
White Other		28 (10%)
Unknown	0	0
BME	20,510 (28.1%)	98 (34%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>72,880 (100%)</b>	<b>288 (100%)</b>

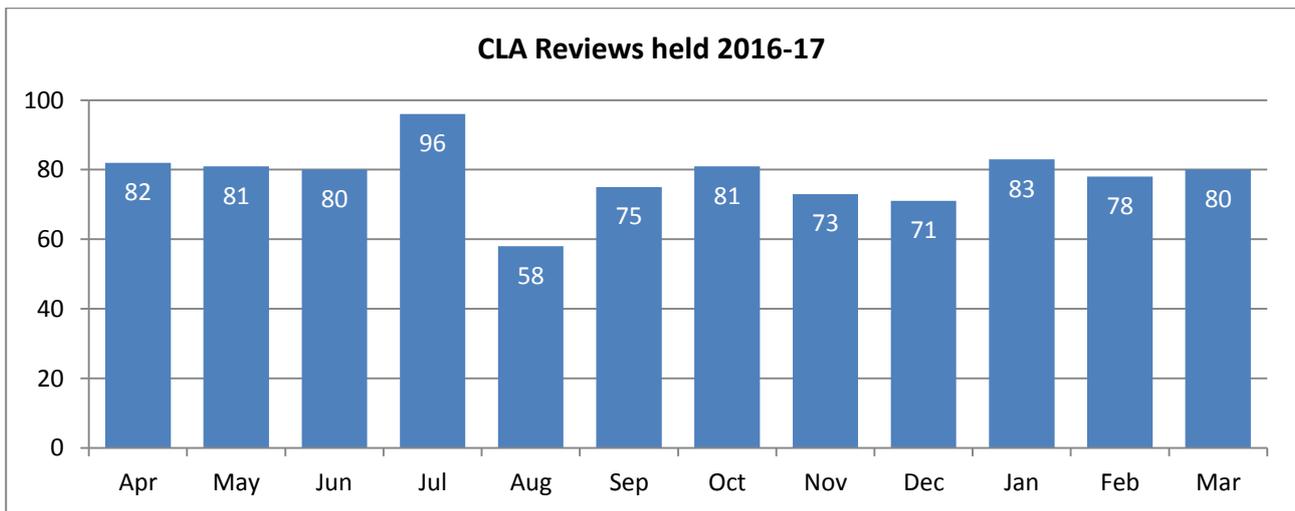
## 5. Activity of the IRO Service

- 5.1 From April 2015 to March 2017 the total number of looked after children has fluctuated between 264 and 301. This variance has remained fairly consistent since 2010. There have been a total of 184 new admissions into care (from 177 children) during the year and 183 episodes of care have ceased (177 children left care). Children may leave care because they have been adopted or placed on a special guardianship or a child arrangement order. Some young people will have turned 18; others will have returned home.
- 5.2 The total number of individual children and young people's CLA reviews held in 2016-17 was 938. 94.9% of these Reviews were held within statutory timescales, an increase from 2015-16. The Service's target is 100%. A key issue impacting on this figure is:

- Placements with Connected Persons not recorded as S.20



- 5.3 Monthly activity for IROs is shown below and averages at 14 children's reviews per 20 working-day month for each IRO (without taking into account annual leave, bank holidays and other duties required of the IRO within the service). The average time for the Bromley IRO service to write up the report for the Review is 12 working days. The IRO Handbook states that the IRO should produce a full record of the review within 15 working days.



- 5.4 The Bromley IRO Service is supported by business support officers who have responsibility for the setting up of reviews including sending out invitation letters, consultation forms and reminder letters. They play a very significant part in helping to ensure reviews are kept within statutory timescales. They also send out the IRO reports following the Review. They scan any associated Review documents onto the Children's Social Care database.
- 5.5 They assist in maintaining the electronic systems for the child and have the responsibility of ensuring that the initial and subsequent health checks take place within the statutory timescales. They send out the paperwork for children looked after medicals and for entering data for medical and dental appointments; including adoption medicals.

## 6. The Children in Our Care

- 6.1 As at 31 March 2017 43.8% of our children looked after were placed with Bromley foster carers. 18.8% were with Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) foster carers. A further 11.1% were with extended family members or friends, as Connected Persons Placements. A further 18.8% of children looked after were in residential placements and 2.1% were in a pre-adoptive placement.
- 6.2 Children's Social Care is committed to improving permanency for all children looked after which is outlined in the Department's Permanency Strategy. In 2016-17 20 children were adopted; an increase from 15 in 2015-16.
- 6.3 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, 15 children were subject to an adoption plan and awaiting an adoption placement (carried over from the previous financial year). A further 21 children became subject to Adoption plans in 2016/2017.

Out of the total of 36 children (15+21):

- 12 children were matched with an adoptive family during the year 2016-17
  - 8 children had their adoption plan rescinded during 2016-17
  - 16 children were actively being found an adoption placement as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017
- 6.4 There were 8 children looked after placed with prospective adopters during the year. Of these:
- 2 children were granted the Adoption Order during the year

- 6 children were in their adoptive placements as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 and work with them and their adopters was undertaken to ensure they achieve permanency through an Adoption Order in 2017-18

6.5 25 children left care on Special Guardianship Orders (SGO); 15 to former foster carers and 10 to other carers. This is an increase from the previous year when 13 left care on a SGO.

6.6 Local authorities have, for a number of years, had an obligation to identify sufficient placements locally for their children looked after. There has been recent significant focus on young people at risk of sexual exploitation. This has galvanised Government to ensure that children are only placed at a distance from home (and in particular in residential accommodation) where there is good reason for this to be the case.

6.7 The changes to the regulations introduced additional requirements on local authorities and, in particular, the DCS to ensure that there are robust processes in place to ensure that care planning (especially when it is felt that the needs of the child are best met in a placement away from the local authority area) takes into account the associated possible risks and puts safeguards in place to reduce the risks. Sometimes a residential placement at a distance may be chosen specifically to protect a young person who has been identified as at significant risk of sexual exploitation.

6.8 As of 31st March 2017, 162 children were placed outside of the borough boundaries. Of these 162 children:

51 were placed more than 20 miles from their home address, of which:

- 19 (37%) were placed with foster carers
- 5 (10%) were placed with connected person foster carers
- 26 (51%) were placed in residential accommodation.
- 1 (2%) were placed with a parent

Of the 26 children and young people placed in residential accommodation:

- 13 (25%) are children with a disability

In relation to the types of placements for the 26 children placed in residential accommodation:

- 3 (9%) were placed in secure/YOI settings
- 0 (0%) were placed in mother & baby units
- 23 (85%) were in children's homes

6.9 When scrutinising the care plan, IROs will always consider whether the placement is meeting all the needs of the child. Consideration will be given to whether an alternative placement closer to Bromley would lead to better outcomes for the child. The safeguarding and wellbeing of the child is the primary concern.

## 7. Children and Young People's Participation

7.1 A child's wishes and feelings are taken into full consideration in the care planning and review process. The IRO will always attempt to meet with the child prior to the Review. 98% of children and young people aged 4 and over participated in their Review. They may have participated by attending their Review and speaking for themselves, or may have conveyed their views via the *Mind of My Own* (MOMO) advocacy app, through an advocate or their IRO.

7.2 There were 793 CLA aged 4 and over who had a CLA review in 2016-17; of these, 785 (97.7%) participated. Below is a table showing the participation classification for the reviews in the year

<b>Participation Code</b>	<b>Child Attendance &amp; Involvement</b>	<b>Number of Reviews</b>	<b>% of Reviews</b>
<b>PN1</b>	<b>Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself</b>	<b>459</b>	<b>58%</b>
<b>PN2</b>	<b>Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>PN3</b>	<b>Child attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally)</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>PN4</b>	<b>Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>PN5</b>	<b>Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate/IRO to speak for him or her</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>PN6</b>	<b>Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium (i.e. MOMO)</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>PN7</b>	<b>Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>793</b>	<b>100%</b>

7.3 Some young people are encouraged to chair or co-chair their own Review.

7.4 During 2016 children and young people have been asked to complete a questionnaire following Reviews to ensure we understand we are meeting their needs and to help us make improvements in the way reviews are held.

7.5 In partnership with the Living in Care Council (LinCC) the pack given to every newly child looked after now has a dedicated section on the IRO and an age appropriate information leaflet on the role of the IRO and their contact details.

7.6 IROs make efforts to contact children and young people between their Reviews. This may be through visiting the children or through phoning them. Not all children want this additional contact and the children's wishes are taken into account. The IRO's contact is likely to be more frequent if the child is not in a settled permanent placement.

## 8. Impact of the IRO Service on Outcomes for Children and Young People

8.1 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. This is used 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. The Department's Escalation Policy is available in the London Borough of Bromley Children's Social Care Procedure Manual and has been recently updated. This document includes templates for the IRO to complete for each stage of the process.

8.2 The table below shows the number of formal IRO escalations over the previous two years.

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
<b>Total number of children where issues have been escalated and resolved</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>54</b>

8.3 Examples of issues escalated over the past year are:

- Delay in implementing significant Review decisions
- Placement Order not having been rescinded
- Delay in recording the PEP meeting
- Delay in completing the Connected Person Assessment
- Pathway Plan not having been updated
- Social worker visits to the child being outside of the statutory timescale

8.4 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.

8.5 Since April 2017 a revised escalation process has been in place which reflects the revised team structures. The service introduced 20-day timescale in March 2017.

8.6 Other practice issues may be resolved outside of the escalation procedure either through the IROs' midway monitoring or through informal raising of issues. Increasingly IROs are meeting and discussing concerns at earlier stages and using informal processes to resolve straightforward issues.

8.7 IROs participate in auditing casefiles and contribute to learning through dissemination of the audits with social workers and partner agencies.

## 9. Contribution to Service Improvement for Children Looked After

9.1 IRO monitoring activity is recorded and monthly escalation reports are presented to the Children's Social Care (CSC) Senior Management Team (SMT). This includes, both points relating to individual children, and also concerns that are more generalised across the service to inform strategic planning.

9.2 A strong relationship between the Living in Care Council (LinCC) and the Independent Reviewing Service is also seen as essential in service improvement for looked after children. Nobody is in a better position to know what the service is like on a day-to-day basis than the children and young people who are in receipt of the service.

9.3 This IRO Annual Report is also an important tool for improving the service for children looked after. For this reason this report will be presented to:

- Children's Social Care (CSC) Senior Management Team (SMT)
- Living in Care Council (LinCC)
- Corporate Parenting Strategy Group
- Lead Member for Children's Services
- Care Services and Education Portfolio Members
- Bromley Safeguarding Children Board

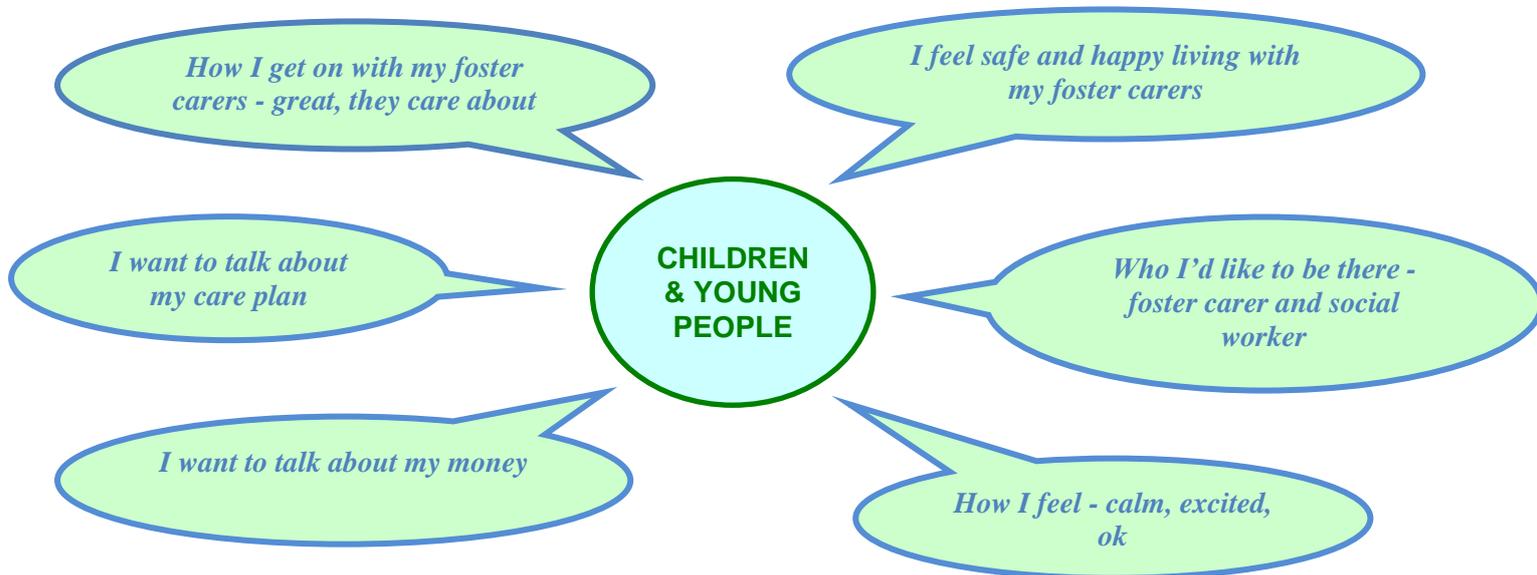
9.4 In addition, the Annual Report is a public document and will be published on the London Borough of Bromley website and the Bromley Children Looked After website.

## 10. Quality Assurance of the Independent Reviewing Service

10.1 Every effort is being made to strengthen the IRO service in line with the Improvement Plan. To this end, two pieces of connected work are being planned for the service. One is an independent review of CLA Review minutes and the other is a review of the role of *Signs of Safety* in reviews. In context of the latter, each reviewing officer is being observed and given detailed feedback.

10.2 Reviewing consultation documents has enabled the service prioritise young people's needs and given young people the opportunity to share good news about what's happening in their lives while in care.

10.3 Examples of what young people said in preparation for their reviews:



## 11. Recruiting, Retaining and Developing Skilled and Knowledgeable Staff

11.1 The IRO Service in Bromley has up until this year had a good record of retaining staff (both IROs and the business support staff) but there has been some movement this year and the service is recruiting to two full-time posts.

- 11.2 Learning is shared through supervision. Changes in legislation, recent case law and new procedures are discussed; as well as practice issues. Reflective practice is promoted through IROs' auditing work. Feedback from observations of Reviews is a useful learning tool. In addition all IROs have been trained in using the *Signs of Safety* model in order to enable use of this approach in supervision and reviews
- 11.3 IROs are actively encouraged to attend relevant training. Examples of training attended over the past year include the BSCB Annual Conference and the London IRO Annual Conference. As part of their social worker registration with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the IROs must maintain a record of their continuous professional development; outlining all activities that have contributed to their ongoing learning. A team away session enabled focus on the quality of care plans.

## 12. Safeguarding Children and Young People in our Care

- 12.1 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"*

- 12.2 A small percentage of children were subject to joint Child Protection/CLA Plans. For the majority of these children the Child Protection Plan was ended at the first or second Review after they became looked after. They were either safeguarded by the legal proceedings or were no longer at risk of significant harm because their circumstances had changed by becoming looked after. New procedures are now in place to ensure that children who become looked after are not subject to a Child Protection Plan.
- 12.3 The IRO will address any safeguarding concerns that are raised within the reviewing and monitoring process. Young people who are assessed to be at risk of sexual exploitation are referred to the Multi-Agency Planning (MAP) meeting.

## 13. Progress on Developments for 2015-16

- 13.1 Review and revise the existing escalation processes so that these are routinely utilised by IROs.

**Outcome: Completed.**

- 13.2 Mandatory training session for all IROs and Group Manager, Quality Improvement Service on practice standards and requirements of their role.

**Outcome: Completed** - All IROs have completed care planning training and other mandatory training.

- 13.3 An independent quality assurance review and audit of CLA Reviews; to scrutinise and challenge IRO practice and ensure CLA reviews meet statutory requirements. Review to include consideration of IRO caseloads and administrative systems, quality of minutes and children's consultation and mid-way monitoring. Report to identify key areas for improvement and a SMART IRO improvement action plan to be monitored by the Group Manager, Quality Improvement Service.

**Outcome: Commissioned and underway from March 2017.**

- 13.4 Joint work with Bexley IRO service to provide peer challenge.

**Outcome: Completed.**

## **14. Areas for Continued Development in 2017-18**

- 14.1 Continue emphasis on practice learning through the *Practice Weeks* in April and in October 2017 to enable senior officers and leaders to meet children and young people and observe child care reviews.
- 14.2 Embed the IRO/CP daily Duty Service.
- 14.3 Linking with operational teams, to share good practice and bring back themes and messages from the teams to strengthen relationship with the operational services.
- 14.4 Be actively involved within the newly-revised Induction Programme for all new staff; which will contribute to the raising of standards of practice for incoming and newly appointed staff and enable the service to recognise and meet the needs of the social work workforce.
- 14.5 Promote the development of revised consultation documents for children and young people devised by LinCC.
- 14.6 Promote and monitor the adherence to the Social Work Practice Standards.
- 14.7 Continue to actively participate in the auditing programme and maintain oversight and good consistent communication with operational teams.

**Wendy Kimberley**  
**September 2017**