

Children's Social Care

Annual Report on Independent Reviewing Officers for Children Looked After

The contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to quality assuring and improving services for children in care of Bromley Council

Update report to January 2022

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Purpose of Report

An annual report of the Independent Reviewing Service for children looked after is required in accordance with the *Children and Young Person's Act 2008* and provides a summary of the work undertaken by the IROs during the year. This is an update report for the current reporting year, 2021-22. The IROs combine their role with that of chairing Child Protection Conferences and are known by the title of Reviewing Officer. This report focuses primarily on the discharge of the IRO role and responsibilities. The terms Reviewing Officer (RO) and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) are used interchangeably in the report. For data relating to Corporate Parenting, this report is recommended to be read in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting Update report also being submitted at this time, authored by the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Leaving Care.

Introduction

- 1.1 The appointment of an Independent Review Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. In March 2010, the government issued new statutory guidance for local authorities and IROs on care planning and reviewing arrangements for looked after children as contained in *Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and Statutory Guidance*. This came into force from April 2011. The IRO handbook 2010 supplements this and provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to children looked after.
- 1.2 The annual report is a management responsibility as set out in the IRO Handbook 2010, Chapter 7, Strategic and Management responsibilities where Section 7.11 states; "The manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed".
- 1.3 Every parent wants the best for their child and as a corporate parent, Bromley Council is working to make sure that the aspirations for our children looked after are that they be healthy, safe and happy, do well at school, enjoy good relationships with their peers

and grow towards adulthood equipped to lead independent lives. This report should be read in conjunction with the updating Corporate Parenting report.

- 1.4 Each child has their own IRO from the time they become looked after. The IRO role is to offer support and challenge and advocacy, to be a critical friend in ensuring care planning is meeting the holistic needs of children within the timescales that children need, escalate issues that are adversely impacting on achieving good outcomes for children to the right level of the management structure, drive and champion plans for permanence, and monitor the performance of the local authority as a corporate parent. Above all, the IRO must make sure that children's wishes and feelings are given full consideration in relation to their care plans and the support being given to them by their social workers.
- 1.5 This report explores the local authority's responsibilities as outlined above.

2. Profile of the Independent Reviewing Service in Bromley

- 2.1 The Reviewing Officers are placed within the Quality Improvement Service in the Children's Social Care Division of the Children, Families and Education Directorate, People Department. Reviewing Officers have a unique position within the Division in that they do not hold the case decision making responsibility or supervisory responsibilities with social workers and can therefore take an independent view of the service and care planning being provided for children. The Reviewing Officers are valued members of the Children's Social Care Division and are not independent of the Local Authority, something that is a common misconception.
- 2.2 The service is structured to be composed of 9.5 full time equivalent post and 1 full-time Fostering IRO (FIRO). The Reviewing Officers are managed by two Group Managers. The fostering IRO conducts the annual review of Bromley foster households to ensure they are meeting fostering standards and providing good parenting to our children living in our care. There is one Business Support Officer who leads on the administration of looked after reviews. The service continues to recruit and uses locum Reviewing Officers, some of whom have worked long term in Bromley. There is occasional turnover of Reviewing Officers, and those who have left moved on to a role in which they focus on one specialism, either as a full time IRO for children looked after or as a chairperson of Child Protection Conferences. The timeliness of the

core function of looked after reviews has been impacted by the integration of our new electronic recording system, Liquid Logic, and is a priority area to ensure our end of year outturn will fully reflect the strong performance that has continued in conducting reviews within timescale. Prior to the introduction of the LCS system, the service performance had improved to 97% of reviews within timescale and our manual tracking in this area confirms that very few reviews fall out of their required timescale.

- 2.3 There continues to be high support and challenge to Reviewing Officers to improve outcomes for children and make a real difference to their lives. The Reviewing Officers have continued to improve the consistency and quality of their tracking and 'footprint' between reviews. This impact has been recognised in our Practice Assurance Stocktakes undertaken of our work alongside the Children Looked After and Leaving Care service areas. The focus has remained on professional development in building knowledge, skills, and abilities of the IROs. The model of writing review minutes to the child or young person is fully embedded and was recognised by Ofsted in the September 2021 Focused Visit. Our Reviewing Officers have grown the leadership element of their role in running Task and Finish groups to lead on how the service improves reviews and the child-centred quality of the records and recommendations from reviews. Starters in the service receive a full two-week induction to support their skills in this aspect of their role and this involves role modelling and observation, which continues beyond this period. The service is strengthening knowledge of the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer and has delivered seminar style training to a cohort of newly qualified social workers and students. This has been expanded and is now available to all new starters (and colleagues who wish to engage with a refresher) on a quarterly basis during 2021-22. Group Managers and the Head of Service have continued to extend the reach of the Quality Improvement Service through membership of the full range of decision-making panels, including Legal Gateway Panel, Placement Panel, Children in Need panel and the Permanency Panel. The service established a Child Protection Scrutiny Panel to seek to unblock children who had been subject to long term Child Protection Plans. This has been successful in reducing the duration of children with Child Protection Plans. During 2021-22, this will extend to thematic sessions which will include scrutiny of care planning and decision making where children with Child Protection Plans may become looked after to support the quality of decision making and permanence planning. The challenge for the service continues to be demonstrating consistently good and excellent work to support and challenge the Division to achieve the best and most timely outcomes possible for children and young people. A particular area of priority focus, underpinned by our

quality assurance work, is to enhance the challenge and scrutiny of permanence planning during the early stages of children's journeys when they are received into care, and close collaborative work with our Safeguarding & Care Planning services will support this area for continuous improvement as we head towards the 2022-23 year.

- 2.4 The team reflects the diversity of the looked after population in Bromley and requires that all IROs have the skills and ability to meet the needs of children from diverse communities.
- 2.5 Guidance from the IRO Handbook outlines that each IRO should have a caseload between 50 to 70 children. During the period of this report the IROs experienced a considerable increase in demand, a pattern reflected across our safeguarding system both locally and regionally. Numbers of children with Child Protection plans increased to more than 380 in the autumn of 2021 and have remained significantly higher than ever before. While this increase in demand appears to have plateaued to some extent, it has meant that our Reviewing Officers have had a high number of Initial and first Review Child Protection Conferences during the present year that has impacted on workloads and RO caseloads, with an increase from around 50 allocations on average to between 60 and 65 allocations. Our ROs have worked very hard to maintain their footprint and tracking of care plans between reviews, but the demand increase combined with adjusting to the new recording system has presently had some negative impact on the performance data output, which is being resolved as a priority alongside colleagues across our fellow services in Children's Social Care. In this context it is of reassurance that general feedback from our Practice Assurance Stocktakes during the year is positive about how ROs are fulfilling their role. Despite the additional workload, our ROs have started visiting targeted young people between reviews and this has been positive for the young people concerned.

3. Corporate Parenting Board

- 3.1 The Deputy Leader is the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and leads the Corporate Parenting Board. The purpose of the Corporate Parenting Board is to ensure the Council with its partners effectively discharges its responsibilities to all children and young people looked after and care leavers.

- 3.2 The Corporate Parenting Board is made up of senior officers of the Council, its partner agencies, members of the Living in Care Council (LinCC) and Change for Care Leavers (CfCL). The Board drives improvement in services through rigorous challenge and support. The Corporate Parenting Board is jointly chaired by the Deputy Leader of the Council, and Portfolio Holder for Education, Children and Families, and the Chair of LinCC.
- 3.3 As a Corporate Parent to all children and young people looked after and care leavers the Council and its partners must act as a responsible and good parent.
- 3.4 The Quality Improvement service has ambition to play a full part in the work of the Corporate Parenting Board and has active membership of each of the sub-groups that reflect the priority areas for development and improvement. The strategic areas the sub-groups are responsible for are Support and Stability, Health and Wellbeing, Education and Enjoyment, Transitions and Independence. The Quality Improvement service is working closely with our Living in Care Council and Change for Care Leavers to improve young people's participation in reviews through delivery of training and support for our Reviewing Officers. Our Reviewing Officers are ambitious to make their reviews as child/young person centred as possible and are developing a model that will aim to embed young person leadership. This is complex in the context of the pandemic to achieve through a virtual meeting methodology and will necessarily involve some return to face-to-face meetings.

4. Voice and Influence of Children and Young People

- 4.1 While this report should be read in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting Update report, children and young people can participate in decisions and activities that shape and influence practice, policies and services that can impact on their lives. Bromley have a dedicated team to work directly with our children to support their inclusion in services, they are called the Active Involvement Team (AIT).
- 4.2 One of the key roles of Reviewing Officers is to offer a critical friend role if there is concern as to how the Local Authority is discharging its Corporate Parenting duties. This can involve raising themes and trends identified with the senior management team or it can on an individual child level see an issue of disagreement escalated for resolution. The Reviewing Officers regularly use the Dispute Resolution Protocol (for

which the service is awaiting a performance data report) and have played an active role in supporting colleagues to improve placement stability for children and young people. Some challenge themes have centred around recognition where children should be accorded Section 20 status as children looked after within family arrangements, quality of care planning and permanence planning for children in relation to their identity and challenge where Connected Persons may not be demonstrating the commitment and standard of care that children would most benefit from and social workers wish to see. Our Reviewing Officers can become more robust in challenging around specific aspects of delay where children may be subject of care proceedings as this will both support and challenge social workers and their managers to evidence they are doing all they can to minimise and reduce delay.

5. Action taken to improve IRO Performance

Supervision, Training and Development for IROs

- 5.1 Reviewing Officers receive monthly supervision and have access to informal supervision as and when needed. Managers remain committed to ensuring the level of supervision and support to the IROs is of the highest standard. Group Managers regularly sample children's records to assess the quality and visibility of IRO support and challenge and have analysed individual areas for focus as required to drive improved practice and performance. The two-week induction period for new starters in the service also includes practice observation and feedback and designated 'Practice Fortnights' for practice observations have been successfully implemented with positive learning for our ROs. The Quality Assurance framework including Practice Assurance Stocktakes support the identification of areas for improvement and the service has played an increasing role in this process and auditing exercises when requested by the Assistant Director of Children's Social Care. The Head of Service of Quality Improvement is a member of the small team undertaking the Practice Assurance Stocktakes under the leadership of our external consultants, while our Reviewing Officers have contributed a significant number of Practice Reviews to support this cycle and will be providing a validating and quality assurance role on a quarterly cycle within our newly launched monthly thematic dip sampling work across all our CSC services. This helps promote the service as champions of quality assurance and best practice. The service is aware of the need to achieve consistent tracking of the progress of children and evidence actions taken to support and challenge social workers and their managers if the RO is concerned about how any aspect of a child or young person's

needs are being responded to, and where there is an indication of drift or delay that can be remedied to achieve timely and ambitious outcomes. Turnover of staff has reduced, and has become more focused around temporary agency cover, with legacy part time roles having been particularly challenging to recruit to with stability. The service is yet to achieve its goal of being permanently staffed and this would be of great benefit for young people. Our recruitment when needed of locums has been more geared towards identifying candidates who are most likely to convert to permanent roles with us, and we have adjusted our rolling recruitment of permanent ROs to set timescales to encourage those interested in working with Bromley to submit applications to a deadline.

- 5.2 One of the Group Managers in the service is an active participant in the regional IRO managers network and was influential in work to establish a standard university level training programme for Reviewing Officers. Our ROs will access this programme during 2022-23 and the aim is to provide a benchmark for ROs in the region to support improved practice as well as recruitment and retention. The Reviewing Officers will be having bespoke Bromley Relationship Model training and will also deliver training to social work colleagues to support our model of safety planning with children and young people which will commence before the end of the current reporting year. Our young people who are members of LinCC will deliver training to our ROs during the February half term, and we aim to mutually learn from each other, with a speed dating session planned followed by a Question Time style Q&A panel forum where the young people can ask questions for debate to help build their understanding of the IRO role and how it differs from the role of their social workers and their team managers.
- 5.3 The Reviewing Officers have a monthly half day team meeting and twice weekly Keeping in Touch meetings in which they share practice themes and trends with each other, including briefings on childcare issues and new developments in practice. Of note, the ROs had a bespoke session to build knowledge and expertise in relation to Early Permanence for children. The ROs enjoy access to all the same training and development opportunities made available for managers and social workers within the department and the service is taking on a greater role in leading learning and development around the quality of planning through delivery of Safety Plan training and a Group Manager delivering Child in Need planning training alongside another Practice Development manager.

- 5.4 Review meeting records have been fully embedded and are written to the child or young person in sensitive language. Shadowing and learning from the best examples of the 'My Review Report' continues to be a key element of induction of new starters in the service as those with previous management or reviewing experience are not all familiar with our methodology when they start in the role with us. As noted above, all new permanent starters have been facilitated with a full two-week induction period and a specific induction programme for all is being developed, while new locum starters are provided with a week long induction including role modelling of chairing our meetings and practice observation.
- 5.5 The ethos of the service is one of collaborative learning through the development of reflection sessions. Reviewing Officers have been committed to the goal of achieving excellence for children and young people and have attended where possible all Getting to Excellence seminars. Four task and finish groups among our Reviewing Officers have concluded with recommendations to progress in four key areas. For our children looked after, these groups have concentrated on our model for participation of children and young people in their reviews and the continuous improvement of IRO records and recommendations. This work will be supported by the training from the members of LinCC that is now fully planned and scheduled. With the Group Manager for the Performance Improvement Board coming within the Quality Improvement service structure from the autumn of 2021, our ROs have benefitted from an extended session regarding our Quality Assurance Framework and all the key findings from the Quality Assurance work undertaken over the preceding 12 months.

Midway reviews to track progress of plan

- 5.6 Reviewing Officers routinely coordinate midway reviews to track the progress of care plans between reviews and consult with children, young people and their carers where this is in a child's best interests. The greater visibility of Reviewing Officers involvement and providing a critical friend voice through their interventions and 'footprint' on children's social care records has been recognised through the undertaking of Practice Assurance Stocktakes of our services throughout 2021. The challenge, now that the service began to show signs of a new stability at the end of the year, is to achieve consistency across the Reviewing Officer group. Our new recording system embeds the RO footprint and as reports are increasingly written, in due course weekly tracking of midway reviews will be able to be undertaken by the management team alongside Reviewing Officers as part of Data Mondays. This will further solidify this aspect of the

reviewing role and will enable greater scrutiny therefore of the quality and impact of tracking between reviews. This tracking can lead to more timely and impactful escalation for children where IRO recommendations are not being taken forward or there is delay in achieving desired outcomes.

Quality Assurance and Monitoring

- 5.7 IRO footprint on the children's and foster carers' files provides evidence of oversight and challenges. The CLA Review Preparation Checklist and Monitoring document is a tool to provide qualitative and quantitative oversight of care planning for each child in the pre-meeting (IRO and social worker meeting before the review) in advance of reviews that ROs undertake. These meetings help ensure statutory requirements have been completed or are in progress, confirm the care plan as well as identifying areas of good practice or where challenge is required. They also ensure that any contentious issues can be discussed more discretely so that these do not affect the quality of the child or young person's review meeting. Practice is developing during 2021-22 so that these pre-meetings are part of the relational aspects of the Reviewing Officer's work with children and young people and will include the pre-review consultation with young people to ensure their full participation in the planning and delivery of their review meeting. This process is evolving alongside ROs visiting some of the young people for whom they fulfil the role, affected for some time unfortunately by the Omicron variant that emerged in late 2021. This practice will contribute to fuller participation of children and young people, forming part of feedback that will be sought from children and young people about every review so that the service can analyse feedback to help improve how it delivers the reviewing role. This tool also supports RO managers to track work with individual children in addition to identifying any trends across a specific team or service along with any practice issues.
- 5.8 The Midway Monitoring Review provides an opportunity for the IRO to track and quality assure the progress and timeliness of planning for children. When required, challenge is raised using the Dispute Resolution Form. This form has been embedded in the new recording system but we are awaiting a data report being written and we are working to improve functionality in the system. Escalations are always discussed between ROs and their line managers but it can be a challenge to receive timely responses from our colleague services. It remains evident from analysis that escalation about care planning from Reviewing Officers is more prevalent in the earlier stages of children's journeys through our services, particularly where children are experiencing delay in

permanence being achieved where there can be extenuating circumstances such as delay caused in family court proceedings. Where children have achieved permanence and receive a specialist service from our Children Looked After social workers, there is less identified need by ROs to escalate and so lower instances of Dispute Resolution. While generally our quality assurance work tells us that IRO recommendations are of a good standard, we are striving to ensure our work at all times is offering more than a check and balance about whether all due processes are being followed by our social workers, so that we are evidencing a role of champions of best quality planning including permanence planning and always challenging from an empathetic perspective where we feel an improved service can be given to children and young people. This is key in relation to a priority area for our ROs in strengthening the quality of permanency planning and the RO role within that goal.

Strengthen the quality of permanency planning for Looked After Children

- 5.9 The Reviewing Officers have continued to ensure that children aged 0-5 years have 3 monthly Reviews rather than the statutory 6 monthly reviews. This practice is embedded and has focused planning by the local authority to reduce the delay for young children and has seen an improvement in the attainment of permanency through adoption and Special Guardianship Orders. Permanency planning for older children has strengthened but requires the RO to remain active to drive this in an ongoing manner until achieved. Reviewing Officers ensure their views are considered at Permanency Planning meetings through their Group Manager, who attends and, on some occasions, chairs this regular panel. This said, we recognise we need to do more, particularly in supporting and challenging our colleagues who are experiencing delays in the court system and ensuring that permanence is considered in detail from the very outset for children from their first looked after review, and this is a priority area for action within the service, underpinned by our Practice Assurance Stocktake with our Safeguarding and Care Planning services in December 2021.

Children's participation in and satisfaction with Reviews

- 5.10 Children participate in the review process in many ways. Children and young people are supported and encouraged to take part in the review of their care plan as they feel most comfortable with. Some like to attend the meeting for a brief period, whilst others prefer to take part in the whole meeting, while others do not attend but share their views with their RO, foster carer or keyworker. With the change to LCS and the rapid

roll out of a wide range of data reports, we are unfortunately awaiting at this stage the participation data for analysis and so data is unavailable to report on currently at this interim stage.

- 5.11 The service continues to distribute and promote consultation forms in advance of looked after reviews which is an additional method for feedback alongside the one-to-one conversations ROs have as part of conducting reviews. We know the forms are unpopular with young people and that they can be put off by some of the questions. It is clear from review records that ROs consult fully with children and young people in line with their wishes, and there is no evidence regionally that the most common paper or virtual form methods are successful for pre-review consultation where the forms are not followed up by anyone having a direct conversation with children and young people. With increase on demands on the service, our ROs have yet been unable to undertake the pre-consultation discussion themselves as we aim to, and this remains therefore a service development for implementation.
- 5.12 During the first 9 months of the current year to the end of December 2021, 71 consultation forms were directly returned and so this is provisional data in terms of the year end figure later this year. These are largely evenly split between foster carers and children but indicating more can be done to fully engage birth parents in consultation, with a small number of forms being returned by birth parents remaining the case now for many years by way of pre-review consultation.
- 5.13 Foster carers and parents are routinely invited to attend reviews or consult with ROs through a separate meeting if it is assessed to be unsafe, not in a child's best interests or contrary to a child's wishes and views to have a parent or foster carer present in their review meeting.

Dispute Resolution Processes

- 5.14 The Dispute Resolution Protocol (DRP) is embedded in our Liquid Logic recording system, but to date we do not have available data, and a report is expected to be written in due course. Practice alerts have continued regularly where there is delay in care planning and one RO exercised the right to seek independent legal advice. At present the Head of Service and our Legal Services are working on delivering a formalised service agreement with a neighbouring Local Authority for the rare occasions when ROs may so fundamentally disagree with the care plan for a child that they consider they must exercise this aspect of their 'independence'. Where our ROs

can improve is the challenge made where practice is not timely or more can be done to progress care plans where children are subject of care proceedings or are within the pre-proceedings process. Our ROs have a strength in identifying where the Local Authority may need to consider a 'private family arrangement' as a care placement, but the evidence base indicates they are more reticent to push for more intensive permanency planning when the Court is involved. The service is working on this as the role requires the confidence to push our colleagues as experts who will drive care plans forward alongside the Court system and legal processes. It will be of significant benefit for the service when weekly reporting around ROs use of DRP is again made available after a long hiatus post the implementation of Liquid Logic.

- 5.15 DRPs have continued to be resolved primarily at the informal or stage 1 levels by ROs alongside our team managers, and only three so far this year have been escalated to Head of Service level. However, analysis of impact does suggest that ROs could escalate more thematically to Heads of Service to inform their knowledge of any specific risks in their service areas. It remains evident that some ROs use the DRP more consistently than others and this remains a challenge to achieve consistency across the ROs.

Impact of Staff Turnover

- 5.16 Nationally recruitment of social workers is challenging, and Bromley have continued to strive for stability with the ambitious target of 90% or higher permanent social workers. We know that changes in social workers impacts on children and their relationships and can impact on care planning.
- 5.17 It is the RO Service's role to promote an optimum service to all our young people in line with national requirements. As with all posts that require a qualified and experienced social worker who has demonstrable management skills, the role is challenging to recruit to. We know from young people that as well as stability of social worker, they value stability and consistency of Reviewing Officer. The service has lost two full time ROs who preferred to leave the dual role and take up roles chairing Child Protection Conferences only. We have recruited locum cover increasingly with a focus on candidates whom we believe are most likely to convert to permanence, but it remains challenging to recruit to the dual role given the roles remain separated in most Local Authority areas in the region. We have altered our strategy of a rolling advert to advertising at intervals with clear deadlines, to test whether this triggers an increase in

application volumes and quality. We are interested in offering an alternative to team management internally and potentially an alternative career pathway to retain good staff in the borough, and a team manager has recently transferred to a FT Reviewing Officer role from a team manager position. This said, we are alert that this can then cause a recruitment gap elsewhere in the service.

Advocacy

- 6.1 Independent advocacy to support children and young people with specific issues about their care plan or the service they are receiving is available to all our children. The service is provided by Advocacy for All. We would like to continue promoting increased use of advocacy by our children and the advocacy service has been more successful to date in working with children who are subject of Child Protection plans.

During the current reporting year, we have focused on increasing the quality of reporting from our advocacy service so we can better understand the reasons that young people have made use of advocacy, to better understand where we may be able to improve. The advocacy service has provided specific case study detail and also breaks down referrals by service area. From this information we can see that young people who wish to use an advocate for support at their looked after reviews are focussed on specific aspects of their care plans that they are dissatisfied with, for example their family contact arrangements. We continue to wish to see more use of advocacy by our children looked after and would welcome invitations by all Heads of Service to attend at service meetings to promote advocacy and answer questions from our social workers. Advocacy is discussed at every review and has a prominent page on the website for children and young people.

- 6.2 The IROs routinely check that the children and young people know about the advocacy service and how it can support decisions about their lives. It continues to be a challenge to translate this promotion in to use of this service by our children but as we move forward we will ensure that they have the choices and options available to them. The improved data set will support this as referral reasons and sources can now be better analysed. Data at the end of December 2021 tells us that 31 children looked after have used the advocacy service, and 11 referrals have been made by our Children Looked After service. At this point, we have not seen any young people self-refer for advocacy, in part this may be positive but also may mean that young people continue to lack confidence or awareness of how advocacy can help and what it may

mean for their valued relationships with their social workers. It may also be that our social workers listen well and respond to young people's wishes and views reliably which in turn prevents a need for an advocate to become involved.

7 Progress of developments and key priorities for 2021/22

- 7.1 *The Reviewing Service will achieve stability and increase permanent staff to the group. This stability will support the successful building of relationships with children and young people with new skills being learned directly from our young people themselves. The stability will also support the service to achieve its goal of all looked after reviews happening within timescale.*

This priority remains of vital significance for us in growing the service. We have been impacted by the significant increase in demand on the safeguarding aspect of the service and combined with the impact of our workflow recording system, our current data is not reflective of the work happening on the ground. Our manual tracking of CLA reviews tells us almost every meeting has been held within timescale but both our ROs and all our colleagues across services continue their adjustment and adaptation to a new way of recording and the service is alert to the workflows that need resolution and continues to work hard to ensure this is resolved and accurate reporting will be in place for the end of the reporting year. The CLA review data output is currently at 72% from LCS performance data. Adjustment and scrutiny of LCS performance is of such significance to successfully embed that a very high amount of time is spent on this, which inevitably impacts on progress in some other areas of priority for the service.

- 7.2 *The use of case escalation will continually demonstrate a curious and appreciative systems-based approach to contribute to learning across the services when we make mistakes, or our systems don't work as intended for children and young people. Case escalation will demonstrate support and robust challenge where necessary but will not focus on achieving set numbers at the expense of the quality of the escalation and its impact for a child.*

Case escalation is well embedded in the service, but we can continue to develop this to evidence key themes and trends from the ROs overview of our services. Most escalations are sensitive, systems based and are proportionate. It is harder to have impact where the ROs are raising issues that are perhaps consequences of the significant increase in demand across our safeguarding system because responses will be apologetic but in fact cannot of itself alter the impact that workload pressures in some service areas may have already had both for families and our staff. Our

continuous learning and quality assurance work tells us that our ROs can take a more active and curious role around permanence planning between children's first and second looked after reviews, and this connects with a renewed focus on permanency planning across our system.

- 7.3 *The Reviewing service will be increasingly visible with its overview and tracking of the progress of care plans and participatory with colleagues as they develop plans to meet children's needs. Reviewing Officers will always consult with children and young people several weeks before their next review, this will be helped by a stable and consistent staff group that is therefore able to form relationships that will see young people look forward to their reviews as a space where they can influence and shape the service and support that they receive.*

Reviewing Officers work collaboratively with social workers and young people and there has been compliments made of ROs during the year for how they have promoted the voices of young people and managed sensitive reviews positively. We are working closely with members of LinCC and have a training session for our ROs scheduled during the February half term as noted above. We will then track the impact of this session and its aim is to improve young people's experiences of reviews so that they can influence and shape the support that they receive.

- 7.4 *That a consistent and defined training and development package for Reviewing Officers be developed alongside a training inventory of all staff in the service.*

To progress this priority our service has led the development of IROs regionally accessing a university programme for IROs and this programme will commence for our ROs later this year. Our ROs are also sharing knowledge of the IRO role and remit across the Department through the provision of regular training sessions available to all.

- 7.5 *We will have a clear sense of young people's experience of reviews and develop our methodologies for consultation, feedback and practice observation in a way that reflects the Bromley Relationship Model (BRM) and demonstrates our ambition to achieve excellence. We will analyse the feedback and demonstrate changes in how we practice and fulfil the reviewing role from this.*

We have developed our understanding of young people's experiences through our work alongside LinCC and we are very grateful that our Reviewing service was selected as a young people's priority. We have implemented 'Practice Fortnights' for practice observation and feedback and our feedback methodology is being developed

through Survey Monkey methodology and will see a quarterly analysis report completed by the Head of Service.

- 7.6 *We will lead on improving the take up of advocacy support by children and young people, including the quality of data and analysis of the advocacy given by our commissioned service.*

We have developed the advocacy reporting to improve quality of analysis and there remains work to do to promote around all our services. The Head of Service now attends the quarterly meetings with our commissioned service and commissioning officers and our ROs are promoting at reviews. We can now see that our CLA service is identifying need in this area and actively referring young people for advocacy where social workers find themselves unable to resolve differences between their assessed views as to support that is in a child's best interests and the child's wishes.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 The Independent Reviewing Service continues to grow and evolve and demonstrate its footprint and impact. The significant increase in demand across our safeguarding system combined with the complications of learning and adjusting to a new recording system has had temporary impact on performance data output and the accurate reflection before LCS went live of 97% of CLA reviews in timescale is something that the service is confident it will evidence as staff across all our services become more confident in using the LCS system. Challenges have continued to be faced with recruitment and retention and we have sought different strategies to achieve this so that we can find lasting consistency in our dual role. The positive work of the service has increasingly been recognised through the Practice Assurance Stocktakes led by our external consultants and the Quality Improvement service has increased its role in this work as well as in the practice reviews that underpin these stocktakes.
- 8.2 There remain challenges for the service to demonstrate good quality relationships with young people which in many ways has been hampered by a relatively new group of Reviewing Officers and the restrictions of the pandemic. This work will include continued strengthening and collaborative working partnerships with all our colleague services to build a culture of appreciation and understanding of the unique role that Reviewing Officers hold within the Children's Social Care Department, and how this can be put to the most effective use.

