

# 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

2022-2023

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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. 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 Annual report, authored by the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Leaving Care.

### 1. 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 annual 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, ensure permanence plans are set out at second looked after reviews, 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 The annual report is written in September 2023 and also provides an update of actions taken in the current reporting year towards achieving our ambitions that our Reviewing Officers evidence they are fulfilling their role with expertise. We recognise and own the challenges for Reviewing Officers and a need to strengthen practice so that they consistently and persistently provide support and challenge where plans for children are not progressing. Specific areas of Reviewing Officers practice that are being strengthened are

- a) the frequency and impact of Reviewing Officers footprint including escalation where this is necessary and helpful in improving children's experiences,
- b) ensuring that children's experiences are captured through Reviewing Officers relationships with them and demonstrating that visits and in person meetings happen between reviews and at reviews.
- c) We are also improving plans so that these are unique to each child.
- d) Ensuring that children are consistently seen in person by their reviewing officers and that this experience reflects our Bromley Relationship Model.
- e) We know that through this, our Reviewing Officers will be better placed to evidence our aspirations of a high performing reviewing team that pro-actively works with colleagues across Children's Social Care to improve outcomes for children, and will perform at a consistently good or better level.

## 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. This role has recently been extended to also provide independent oversight in reviewing children living in private fostering households. There is one Business Support Officer who leads on the administration of looked after reviews. The service has had a consistent group of Reviewing Officers although this is now needing to change in response to health difficulties experienced by some staff. We continue to have a mix of permanent staff and agency staff filling our Reviewing Officer posts. Two of the Reviewing Officer posts are currently Agency staff.
- 2.3 Reviewing Officers have faced challenges to their role during this period. A rise in numbers of children with CP plans in Bromley combined with the number of children looked after, has impacted on capacity and resilience within the Reviewing Officer group to deliver 'in-person' reviews. Our quality assurance and auditing processes identified this lapse in performance during 2022/23. To address this challenge we have recruited two additional Reviewing Officers to meet our goal of all reviews and conferences being in person. Our IRO caseloads have remained within reasonable thresholds during this period.
- 2.4 The model of writing review minutes directly addressing the child or young person is embedded and was recognised as good practice by Ofsted during the September 2021 Focused Visit. ROs record visits to children in the same style and we an 'engagement budget' available to ensure that ROs develop meaningful relationships with our children facilitated by activities, to have more impact in relation to building trust and as such care planning. Our Reviewing Officers have been challenged to grow the leadership aspect of their role and evidence their accountability for their practice and evidence support and challenge more clearly on behalf of children. This is evidenced by our Reviewing Officers tracking weekly their performance and accounting for this through their line management structure.
- 2.5 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 continues with each cohort joining Bromley and will be expanded and made available to all new starters (and colleagues who wish to engage with a refresher) on a quarterly basis as part of the rolling learning and development offer to social workers and their managers.
- 2.6 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. Reviewing Officers are also required to attend Permanency Panel where this is possible to increase overview and support progression of permanency planning at the earliest stage to improve the quality of second looked after reviews. Reviewing Officers have named links to service areas across the

Department and this is experienced as helpful in sharing learning and strengthening joined up practice, providing a two way exchange of themes and trends as part of continuous improvement. The service oversees a Child Protection Scrutiny Panel seeking to avoid any drift for children subject to longer Child Protection Plans. This has supported progress towards improving outcomes for children who have been subject of long duration Child Protection Plans.

- 2.7 A key challenge for the service continues to be to strengthen resilience, capacity and skills to evidence 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 throughout 2023-24, and to demonstrate relationships with children and young people that underpin this.
- 2.8 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.
- 2.9 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 nationally and regionally. Numbers of children with Child Protection plans increased to 412 during September 2022 and remain around 350. While this means caseloads have increased, we have maintained these within guidance parameters. In this context and knowing ourselves well, our Reviewing Officers are working hard to be solution focused and to support best practice. Despite some increased demand, our ROs are regularly visiting targeted young people between reviews and this has been positive for the young people concerned and positive feedback has been received. We continue to prioritise reviews in person and for Reviewing officers to utilise positively all face to face contact with young people, an example of this is where visits to children have sometimes been used as pre-review planning with young people, or as a midway review. Reviewing Officers record visits they undertake to the child and have taken young people out where this is in line with a young person's wishes. The additional capacity to address issues of sickness within the service is now allowing us to return to a position where all mid-ways can be in-person.
- 2.10 We know ourselves well and what we need to improve upon as a service and key practice areas being strengthened include the frequency and quality of oversight including mid-way reviews to ensure that ROs are evidencing their analysis and support around how children's experiences are improving, enhancing evidence of challenge where challenge is due, and focusing plans from the child's perspective and on the evidence base required that will successfully and quickly address parental capacity to meet children's needs. To address this, we have delivered development sessions around planning, shared exemplars of plans with ROs, provided guidance including do's and don'ts and have ensured that ROs always evidence they have scheduled their midway reviews at each full review. We are ambitious that our midways include a visit to children and young people wherever possible to ensure that current wishes and views are ascertained when considering the progress of care plans, and this is set as an expectation of our ROs. We are supported by our practitioners development group (CSCPAG), Principal Social Worker and our young people to achieve our ambitions, and will be inviting young people to join part of our team meetings at regular intervals as we progress further so that they can directly influence and participate in the development and delivery of the best quality reviews. Young people have shared that they are increasingly enjoying positive and helpful relationships with their RO's and this gives us the basis to improve standards.

### **3. Corporate Parenting Board**

- 3.1 The Deputy Leader of the Council 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 have 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 has worked 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. There are positive examples of young people chairing and co-chairing reviews that they have given positive feedback about. An outcome of our close work with young people is that they plan to produce their own leaflets for children and young people in age bands about their reviews as well as a proposed service take-over day. The leaflets will be supportive in improving the participation and empowerment of all children and young people in their reviews and relationships with Reviewing Officers.
- 3.5 The Head of Service is also involved in the "Gentlemans Tea" meetings where children in care meet with a number of senior leaders to talk about any subject that might be on their minds. Recent topics include relationships, role models (an interesting discussion about the profile of Andrew Tate) and a discussion about what "manhood" is.

## 4. Voice and Influence of Children and Young People

- 4.1 While this report should be read in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting 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 and have played an active role in supporting colleagues to improve placement stability for children and young people. From our own internal audit cycles we have identified that some challenges 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, challenge of contact arrangements for children, quality of relationships with social workers 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 are now receiving support to be robust in challenging specific aspects of delay and evidence increasing challenge to Heads of Service when there is evidence of drift and delay. Through weekly tracking with their line managers, ROs are being helped to demonstrate persistence in their challenge so their role can have the most positive impact on children's lives. Our Reviewing Officers are also clear as to what they need to do to evidence more effective challenge of timely permanency planning and the requirement that children have a permanence plan at the time of their second looked after review.

## 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 are committed to ensuring the level of supervision and support to the IROs is of the highest standard. Group Managers have delivered a range of work to strengthen child focused plans including a specific development session with the QA Lead Manager, an exemplar, direct teaching through manager scrutiny of each plan. This area of focus was also identified through our own internal auditing cycles.

The service needs to continue strengthening plans as these approaches have not yet seen consistent evidence of the targeted improvements. Group Managers and our Principal Social Worker will commence live learning therefore with ROs to offer a different learning style to embed strengthened plans that are unique to each child and focus on improving parental capacity.

- 5.2 The Quality Assurance framework supports the identification of areas for improvement and the service has played a significant role in this process and auditing exercises. 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. The staff group has been stable but we are presently strengthening with further recruitment to add resilience and capacity to thoroughly evidence the relationships of ROs with children and young people. Although the service is yet to achieve its goal of being permanently staffed, our agency Reviewing Officers are committed to our children and choose to work with us longer term. 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.

- 5.3 One of the Group Managers in the service is an active participant in the regional IRO managers network and was influential in establishing a standard university level training programme for Reviewing Officers. Our ROs have accessed this programme via Edge Hill University from May to July 2022 and the aim is to provide a benchmark for ROs in the region to support improved practice as well as recruitment and retention. Reviewing Officers were enthused and made pledges in relation to their practice in the role. The Reviewing Officers have received a bespoke Bromley Relationship Model development session with our Principal Social Worker and this has supported them to now have a specific BRM embedding plan that directly connects across the core behaviours of our practice model in relation to the leadership and management aspect of their role. Our Reviewing Officers have delivered training to social work colleagues to support our model of safety planning with children and young people to support the launch of our 'My Safety Plan' model and this was well received by our colleagues in our Safeguarding and Care Planning services as part of their Bitesize learning programme in line with their service development plan. Our young people who are members of LinCC and CFCL delivered further training to our ROs during the October 2022 half term. This was successful and the young people will be developing leaflets for young people of different ages from their perspective which will contribute to empowering young people to participate as fully as they wish to. The young people have also chaired or co-chaired their reviews and this is supporting trailblazing with Reviewing Officers so that this approach can be influential at in person reviews.

- 5.4 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 has taken 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. The service has delivered sessions around the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer, including a presentation to our Getting to Excellence seminar to strengthen awareness and knowledge of the role across the Department.

- 5.5 In addition, the service has been strengthened with focussed sessions provided to learn from audit findings, giving the direct link for our quality assurance work to have impact, and 1:1 reflective sessions to embed learning from individual case audits in relation to the Reviewing Officer role. Reviewing Officers have all received 'in a nutshell' Do's and Don'ts guidance to support strengthening of practice and have received development sessions to strengthen plans so that these are focused on the needs of each individual child and where changes need to be evidenced in relation to parental capacity. This intensive work is continuing at pace and our Reviewing Officers are tracking their progress in evidencing our quality assurance findings with their Group Managers, feeding back each week to their Head of Service.
- 5.6 Review meeting records have been fully embedded and are written to the child or young person in sensitive language. While Ofsted recognised in October 2021 that our approach to review meeting records is well embedded, and we are re-visiting the quality of our review records to seek improvements in the child centred language used in these records. Our bespoke session with our Principal Social Worker around the Bromley Relationship Model is supporting this refreshment of striving for the highest quality records for children and young people, and Reviewing Officers are challenged weekly to evidence they are holding in person meetings and will be seeing children at regular intervals.

### ***Midway reviews to track progress of plan***

- 5.8 Reviewing Officers are required to undertake 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. ROs are working at pace to evidence the impact of their support and challenge, and that they are driving the progress of children's plans through their overview. Strengthened systems to track RO's scheduling, holding and recording of midways now includes an impact statement for the child. Our expectation and ambition is that ROs always see children as part of their midway monitoring and have directly ascertained their wishes and views.

### ***Quality Assurance and Monitoring***

- 5.9 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. We know that ROs can strengthen this work further, hence the importance of using the challenges from audit findings to deliver additional training sessions so there

is increased pace and drive to ensure that ROs consistently evidence this including all reviews being scheduled and held in person. 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. We have sought feedback and participation from our young people in redesigning consultation papers and how best to send and receive these in advance of reviews, and a refreshed paper is being developed following consultation with our young people.

- 5.10 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. 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 often 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. We are working at pace 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 where we feel an improved service can be given to children and young people. This is key in relation to two priority areas for our ROs in strengthening the quality of permanency planning and the RO role within that goal, and strengthening RO plans/recommendations so that these are of a consistently high standard or better.

### ***Strengthen the quality of permanency planning for Looked After Children***

- 5.11 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. To further strengthen RO practice it is imperative that we maintain the expectation that all of these reviews happen in person including for young children who are placed for adoption. 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 this weekly panel, and Reviewing Officers also attend where this is possible. This said, we recognise we need to do more and at pace, 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. This is a priority area for action within the service, underpinned by findings from our Quality Assurance work. Tools to support this aspect of RO practice have been developed in the service, including weekly trackers, so that our ROs will consistently evidence this aspect of their role to a high standard or better.

### ***Children's participation in and satisfaction with Reviews***

- 5.12 During the 2022-23 reporting year, 847 CLA reviews were held for 378 children. Children participate in the review process in many ways and the information is set out below.

Participation Code	Number of Reviews	Percentage of Reviews
PN0: Child Aged under 4 at time of review	127	15%
PN1: Child or Young Person physically attends and speaks for him or herself	365	43%
PN2: Child/Young Person physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf	10	1%
PN3: Child/Young Person attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally)	4	0%
PN4: Child/Young Person physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her views symbolically and does not ask an advocate.	19	2%
PN5: Child/Young Person does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her.	50	6%
PN6: Child/Young Person does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the Review by a facilitative medium.	170	20%
PN7: Child/Young Person does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed in any way to the Review.	102	12%

- 5.13 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. We have listened to our young people and all our ROs have written a personalised letter to all our children and young people looked after to explain their role and tell our young people a little about themselves. This has been really appreciated by children and young people, who increasingly feel they have a better understanding of the role of their Independent Reviewing Officer and how this works alongside their key relationship with their social workers. The challenge for Reviewing Officers is to then sustain this between reviews and be pro-active in checking in with young people between reviews.
- 5.14 Participation during the 2022-23 reporting year saw 88% of children and young people take part in their reviews. 15% of the reviews held during the year were children aged under 4 at the time of their review and these children have reviews on a three-monthly cycle. The challenge for Reviewing Officers is to ensure this triangulates with their footprint driving permanency planning and challenging delay in achieving permanence. This is tracked by managers in weekly meetings with each Reviewing Officer to support our ambitions to improve.
- 5.15 The most significant finding is that of the 12% who did not attend or express views, there is a commonality that older young people aged 15-17, particularly boys, are not wishing to take part. While this is an age where young people are more able to make choices around whether their review is something they wish to take part in, co-production with young people in this age group is significant for us to make lasting progress with, both from our Social Workers and our Reviewing Officers. We

paid particular focus during the year to reviews being held in timescale with support from our performance team and saw increase in this being achieved to nearly 96%. However, children for whom all of their reviews during the reporting year were in timescale was 92% meaning 8% of children had one of their reviews during the year outside of timescale. Our learning from quality assurance work identifies a need for Reviewing Officers to be travelling much more regularly to see children in person. We have reinstated that all looked after reviews are now held in this way and additional recruitment is providing capacity in our system to always achieve this.

- 5.16 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 from speaking with our young people that the forms are unpopular and that they can be put off by some of the questions. It has become less clear overall from review records that ROs always consult fully with children and young people in line with their wishes. We expect our ROs to hold a pre-consultation discussion with children and young people and this is a service priority to strengthen practice.
- 5.17 During the 2022-23 reporting year, 94 consultation forms were directly returned representing a small increase on the previous 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 being evident by way of pre-review consultation.
- 5.18 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***

- 5.19 The Dispute Resolution Protocol (DRP) is embedded in our case recording system. Our ambition is to improve the quality of RO challenge to evidence this is always made and followed up persistently for children where practice is not timely for children or more can be done to progress plans that are delayed in being achieved. providing clear evidence of the impact of escalation in improving children's experiences. This correlates with our need to see our Reviewing Officers acting more assertively around permanency planning for children, especially at the point of a child's second looked after review. We have addressed this through strengthened tracking of cases that ROs are worried about, with our Group Managers meeting weekly with ROs and dedicating time to consider what children need to be escalated and how this will best be achieved. This is being strengthened further by Group Managers adding oversight to children's records to support the ROs in this process and Head of Service escalation to other Heads of Service where they are not responding to DRP in a timely way.
- 5.20 Our ROs have evidenced their identification 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 social work colleagues and team managers as experts who will drive care plans forward purposefully alongside the Court system and legal processes, and is a key function of the IRO role in relation to the leadership and management aspect of it.
- 5.21 DRPs have continued to be resolved primarily at the informal or stage 1 levels by ROs alongside our team managers. 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 through weekly tracking meetings Group Managers hold with ROs at this time

### ***Impact of Staff Turnover***

- 5.22 Nationally recruitment of social workers is challenging, and Bromley have continued to strive for stability with the ambitious target of 90% permanent social workers. We know that changes in social workers impacts on children and their relationships and can impact on care planning.
- 5.23 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. 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 or a pathway for senior practitioners who may prefer a Reviewing Officer role as their first step in to management positions.

## 6. 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 drive the need for continuous improvement. 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. Our young people's awareness of advocacy has grown and our Reviewing Officers must ensure they always discuss advocacy and young people's entitlement to this at every review. We saw a decrease during 2022-23 to 29 advocacy referrals for our children looked after compared with 38 referrals the previous year. We re-commissioned our advocacy service during 2022-23 and have adjusted the service specifications to be more robust as to the reporting required to better suit our ability to analyse the impact of advocacy for our children looked after and advocacy delivery for our care leavers where they wish to seek such representation.

6.2 Our children are also encouraged to submit formal complaints when they are dissatisfied with any aspect of their care plan and service they are receiving. In the 2022-23 year we received and resolved four complaints from young people at a stage 1 response level.

6.3 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 into use of this service by our children but we are ambitious to ensure that they have the choices and options available to them. At this point, we do not see many 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, and the numbers correspond with a very low number of formal complaints made by our children looked after about the services they are receiving.

## 7 Progress of developments and key priorities for 2023/24

- 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 and in person while also seeing children at regular intervals.*

This priority remains the central challenge for the service. While the service has been affected to some extent by the combination of demand in the social care system and illness, we have maintained caseloads at a reasonable level and provide a supportive environment that has attracted high quality agency staff alongside our permanent staff that has the experience and skills to deliver what we require to see the most impactful reviewing. We retain our ambition to ensure all reviews are within timescale but also are meetings that address the aspects that our young people tell us are most important to them. Our ambition is to ensure that the Reviewing Officers develop their relationships with young people so that we see chairing or co-chairing of reviews to become the primary method of delivery with skilled support from our Reviewing Officers. This will be supported through the weekly tracking meetings between Reviewing Officers and their line managers with data collected to evidence success in this.

- 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 can be strengthened 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 but nonetheless necessary to shine light on areas where work with children and their families can be improved. Our escalations tell us that preparations for key statutory meetings are being adversely impacted by social workers workloads and that this can affect the quality of those meetings with children and their families. Our continuous learning and quality assurance work tells us that our ROs must 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 to ensure we always evidence the pathway and thinking made towards achieving permanence in the timeliest way. Our ROs can strengthen their consistency of challenge and their persistence in resolving escalations and this is now tracked on a weekly basis with Reviewing Officers and improvement is being seen in this area. Reviewing Officers are now required to identify for weekly tracking the children they are most worried about to then consider and demonstrate how they can support and challenge what is being done for those children to improve their experiences.

- 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 have worked closely with members of LinCC and CFCL, commencing training for our ROs from the young people's perspective and following up with a further half day session in October 2022. This has improved young people's experiences of reviews so that they can influence and shape the support that they receive. Most significantly, Reviewing Officers will during the next reporting year demonstrate much more mobility in building their relationships with young people in person and further work is planned with young people to directly influence RO practice by attending team meetings.

**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 our Reviewing Officers benefitted immensely from this course run by Edge Hill University, with pledges that are reviewed with them around changes to their practice. This said, the service will deliver bespoke learning and development sessions as part of its approach to strengthening RO practice to ensure learning from our quality assurance work impacts positively for our ROs.

**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 worked with exemplars to strengthen child focused plans with specific actions and plan live learning for ROs during CP conferences alongside our Principal Social Worker to give direct mentoring for our ROs to support them to achieve consistently good or better plans. Our refreshed consultation forms will have final overview from our young people before being launched and we are providing parents/carers with consultation forms following every CP conference to ensure we can analyse families experiences of these meetings to support continuous improvement. We have had a bespoke session with our Principal Social Worker to explicitly agree a work plan for our ROs to be able to strongly evidence our Bromley Relationship Model throughout their work in relation to the leadership and management aspect of their role. Our young people have an exciting plan to develop leaflets for children across age groups to support their participation in their reviews and a prospective service take-over day.

**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 , with its key challenges to strengthen relationships, footprint and consistently evidence impact of the role in improving children’s experiences, has put in place a range of measures to ensure there is improvement to be consistently good or better Learning and Development opportunities that are specific for our Reviewing Officers have been put in place and this contributes to our ROs feeling valued and has given reflective space to make improvements to their practice. We know ourselves well and the areas that we need to continue to improve upon on behalf of our looked after children and have utilised our audit processes to target training and practice discussions which are linked to service improvement.
- 8.2 There remain challenges for the service to demonstrate good quality relationships with young people alongside the most effective challenge and support of our colleagues across the Children’s Social Care department. This work will include continued strengthening of our 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. This will be underpinned by a regular training programme offered and has been supported by the Head of Service delivering a presentation to the Department about the IRO Handbook and the role of the IRO at one of our Getting to Excellence seminars during the period.
- 8.3 The service is strengthening and we know clearly what this will take, so that we can achieve our ambition to fulfil the Reviewing role to a consistently high standard. We have undertaken a range of actions to strengthen the Reviewing Officer role and continue to do so. For targeted improvement the service has delivered specific learning and development sessions and issued exemplars to improve plans. We have seen improvement in some aspects of planning and the focus now is on strengthening specific outcomes that are unique for each child and focus on parental capacity.

We are implementing a live learning methodology to strengthen plans further with our Group Managers and Principal Social Worker identifying a programme of support in real time for ROs during their meetings. The service has provided an aide-memoire of Do’s and Don’ts in RO practice and has participated in development sessions with the Director of Children’s Services and jointly with the Head of Service and QA Lead Manager to learn from our audit findings and implement an impactful response. Reviewing Officers have weekly trackers which are scrutinised each week in individual meetings with their line managers so that bespoke support is given to impact upon the quality of escalation and footprint as well as to ensure that all our meetings happen in person with children and their families.

We have undertaken additional recruitment of three Reviewing Officers to strengthen capacity in response to some health problems affecting practice and are ambitious to achieve visits to children as part of midway processes. We have seen visits to children from ROs during the past six months that have had positive impact for children in relation to their care plans and experiences, and the Head of Service has made funds available for ROs to do activities with children when visiting.