

**REPORT FOR: Corporate Parenting  
Panel**

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**Date of Meeting:** 10<sup>th</sup> July 2012

**Subject:** INFORMATION REPORT – Annual  
Independent Reviewing Officers' Report  
1 January 2011 – 31 December 2011

**Responsible Officer:** Catherine Doran, Corporate Director,  
Children and Families

**Exempt:** No

**Enclosures:** None

## **Section 1 – Summary**

The purpose of this report is to provide a context for how the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer service (IRO) is undertaken in Harrow and to summarise the issues that have arisen in the last 12 month period.

**FOR INFORMATION**

## **Section 2 – Report**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this report is to provide a context for how the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer service (IRO) is undertaken in Harrow and to summarise the issues that have arisen in the last 12 month period. This annual report will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Group, the Local Safeguarding Children Board and to the Portfolio Holders for children's services. The report will be available on the Council's website. The report covers period from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011.

The IRO service is part of the Quality Assurance, Commissioning and Schools Division in the Children's Services Directorate. The IRO manager reports to the Service Manager Quality Assurance and Service Improvement.

#### The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer

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 IRO's 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 which came into force in April 2011. The IRO handbook 2010 supplements this and provides guidance to IRO's about how they should discharge their duties to looked-after-children.

#### **The changes to the role of the IRO as prescribed in the new guidance and handbook include:**

- IROs would monitor the local authority's performance of its functions in relation to a child's case rather than only the review. The IRO therefore has a responsibility to monitor the process as well as the planning and to track the progress of a child's case between reviews
- IROs will have the authority to adjourn review meetings if they are of the view that it would not fulfil its purpose, for example if the relevant people have not had an opportunity to contribute
- IROs must speak in private with each child prior to each review so that the IRO personally establishes the child's wishes and feelings about the issues to be covered at the care planning meeting and that the feelings of the child must be given 'due consideration'.
- Referral by an IRO of a case to Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service CAFCASS should no longer be seen as a last resort, but can be considered at any time

- Proposals made at a child's review become decisions and must be implemented unless challenged by the local authority within a week.

It is noted that this has been the practice of IROs locally for some time although no case or issue has warranted a formal referral to CAFCASS. The annual report is a management responsibility as set out in the IRO Handbook 2010:

*'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'*

This annual report is structured using the headings as prescribed in the guidance.

**The development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment, the make-up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving**

The Reviewing Team

- There are 3.2 IROs posts who chair the reviews of Children Looked After (CLA). Two of the IROs are British Asian; one is White British; and the other is White European. All have been in post for over three years
- One of the part time IROs can also be called upon to chair Child Protection case conferences
- The team also consists of 1.5 support workers who set up the reviews, a Panel Coordinator and an Assistant who administers the Adoption and Fostering Panels and deals with the administration of access to records requests
- In addition there is a Life Chances and Young People's Consultation Officer who meets with young people prior to the review to record their views
- The manager of the IRO service is Greek Cypriot and has been in post for over three years.

**The number of CLA**

On 1 January 2011 there were 124 CLA. On 31 December 2011 there were 150 CLA (plus 2 young people receiving a series of short breaks). This equates to approximately 50 CLA per full time equivalent IRO which is comfortably in the range recommended in statutory guidance: 'It is estimated that a caseload of 50 to 70 looked after children for a full-time equivalent IRO would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service...' (IRO handbook, paragraph 7.15, p50).

The IROs undertook a total of 449 reviews during the calendar year. This number reflects a steady flow of new children entering the care system as well

as IROs bringing reviews forward to ensure timeliness of care planning as well as responding to changes in care plans.

Although there has been an increase of CLA during the calendar year the general trend has been a decrease in the number of children looked after over the last few years. There have been a number of contributory factors for the local increase in the calendar year:

- There has been a decrease in the number of children with child protection plans. Historically there is a strong correlation between the number of children looked after and those with child protection plans. If the number of plans go up the number of children looked after go down, and vice versa. The trend is that arrangements are made for children to become looked after rather than having child protection plans.
- The House of Lords Ruling (G vs. Southwark) 2009, otherwise known as the Southwark Judgement ruled that *“local authorities should presume any lone, homeless children should be provided with accommodation under section 20 of the 1989 Children Act. Where the criteria for section 20 have been met, children’s services do not have the discretion to choose to use section 17 powers instead to provide accommodation”*. There has been an increase of 16 and 17 year olds becoming looked after in Harrow.

**Table 1: CLA grouped by ethnicity and gender**

	Male	Female	Total
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Asian or Asian British (Any other Asian background)	14	1	15
Asian or Asian British (Bangladeshi)	0	1	1
Asian or Asian British (Indian)	4	1	5
Asian or Asian British (Pakistani)	2	0	2
Black or Black British (African)	5	4	9
Black or Black British (Any other Black background)	7	3	10
Black or Black British (Caribbean)	4	7	11
Mixed (Any other mixed background)	4	3	7
Mixed (White and Asian)	0	1	1
Mixed (White and Black African)	3	1	4
Mixed (White and Black Caribbean)	12	10	22
Other Ethnic Groups (Any other ethnic group)	10	4	14
White (Any other White background)	3	3	6
White (British)	25	14	39
White (Irish)	4	0	4

The IRO team reflects the Asian and White population but does not reflect the Black African and Caribbean CLA. In addition, other than the IRO manager there are no male IROs.

**Placement type:**

<b>Placement Code</b>	<b>Placement Type</b>	<b>Count</b>
H5	Residential accommodation not subject to 'Children's homes regulations'	2
K1	Looked After & Placed in Secure Unit	1
K2	Placement in Homes & Hotels subject to Children's Homes Regulations	17
M2	Whereabouts known (not in Refuge)	1
M3	Whereabouts unknown	1
P1	Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility	1
P2	Independent living , e.g. in flat, lodgings, bedsit, B/B or with friends, with or without formal support	23
Q1	Foster Placement with Relative or Friend	8
Q2	Placement with other Foster Carer	83
R2	NHS/Health Trust or other establishment providing medical or nursing care	1
R3	Family centre or mother and baby unit	1
S1	All Residential schools, except where dual-registered as a school and children's home	10

The IROs have an important role in ensuring that children have a say in where they live and in particular which siblings they are placed with if they enter the care system. This is in line with the Statutory Guidance 'Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children, 2010' – this provides guidance for local authorities and their partners about the local authority's duty under section 22G of the 1989 Act to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for looked after children within the local authority area.

One of the most vulnerable group of children are those who are placed in secure accommodation for welfare reasons. In total there were 2 young people who were in secure accommodation during the year. In addition to the normal CLA reviews a panel, comprising of an Independent Chair and 2 Councillors, is established in respect of every secure placement in order to consider the criteria for placing that child within secure accommodation. This not only provides another line of independent scrutiny of the care planning for this very specific group of young people but also provides a way by which councillors can discharge their duties as Corporate Parents. Councillors take this role very seriously and have championed the needs of this group of CLA.

### **Extent of participation of children and their parents:**

#### **Participation by children**

There is an expectation that CLA participate as fully as possible in their reviews.

Of the 310 reviews undertaken in the year whereby young people could have participated there were a total of 12 reviews that the young person did not participate. This relates to 10 CLA. The breakdown is as follows:

Attend and speaks for themselves = 222

Attends and an advocate speaks for them = 5

Attends and conveys their views non-verbally = 3

Attends; does not speak for themselves / convey their views = 1

Does not attend but asks advocate to speak for them = 15

Does not attend but conveys their feelings to the conference = 52

Does not attend nor conveys their view to the conference = 12

There is active communication between the IRO, social worker, the CLA administrators and the Life Chances and Young People's Consultation Officer to ensure that CLA are engaged in recording their views and participating in person at their reviews. Some young people do not wish or are not available to participate in their reviews. Examples identified during the year were:

- CLA who are missing or abscond regularly
- CLA who do not wish to engage with their social worker and other professionals.

When these young people are identified the relevant IRO will discuss with the social worker, the CLA administrators and the Life Chances and Young People's Consultation Officer how best to engage the young people in the review process. Strategies include:

- Contact by mobile and texting
- E-mail
- Offering an advocate and/or Independent Visitor.

Texting and contact by mobile is a common method by which CLA and IROs communicate. The transcript of the mobile messages sent to an IRO by one young person was used as a way of passing on a complaint to Children Services. In another example the IRO advised a young person that she could text her at any time following a placement disruption. As a result of this regular communication the IRO was able to facilitate a return to the placement by acting as conduit for the different parties,

### **Children with Disabilities**

The Life Chances and Young People's Consultation Officer, in collaboration with colleagues from the short break provision, The Firs, in Harrow has developed a consultation process for children with communication issues called "Stop, Look and Listen". There are 3 connected processes:

- Observation – observing the young person and their reactions, routine in placement, interaction with staff and carers

- Speaking to staff/key worker – going through the questions with staff to help in completing the questions sometimes on behalf of the young person, depending on the communication issue
- One to one with the young person – this is meeting the young person with either staff present or alone and asking them the Stop, Look and Listen questions.

Every effort is made to involve CLA with a disability to participate in their review. However it is accepted that for some young CLA with severe communication and learning issues this may not be by attending the meeting in person.

### **Participation by parents**

There is an expectation that parents are invited to reviews and if not the reasons clearly documented and a plan agreed as to how their views can be recorded and the outcome of the review relayed. There are a number of reasons recorded in the year as to why parents were not invited:

- The child's wishes and feelings
- The whereabouts of the parents were not known
- Contact was terminated as the child was placed for adoption
- Serious concerns about the behaviour of the parent.

There were also a number of reasons why parents and other key family members did not attend:

- Unwell
- Work commitments
- Disengagement from the child and/or the plans for the child
- Length of the journey.

In all cases the IROs offered to meet with parents who are either not invited or who are unable to attend. The IROs have also carried out reviews over a series of meetings – with different people involved- to accommodate attendance and participation by parents.

Of 449 reviews in the year there were a total of 97 where the parent(s) were invited but did not attend. This equates to 21.6% of all reviews. Further work is required by the IRO service to interrogate this information as it does represent a higher than expected percentage of non parental participation.

## **The quality of participation and views of CLA**

This is the pivotal area of focus for reviews. There is an expectation that social workers and IROs prepare young people for their reviews so that they can contribute as fully to the process as possible. IROs make every attempt to see young people prior to their reviews and to establish a meaningful and trusting relationship. As indicated above the IRO service looks at creative ways of engaging with young people. Other processes are also undertaken and considered to facilitate participation:

- The Life Chances and Young People's Consultation Officer arranges to see children from the age of 4 to 18 to complete consultation forms prior to their LAC review. Some children prefer to complete the consultation forms on their own. The Life Chances and Young People's Consultation Officer identifies which young people may require and who would benefit from face to face completion of the consultation forms
- The IROs will facilitate the involvement of Advocates and Independent Visitors. During the period 1 April 2010 – 31 March 2011 the Advocacy service provided support to 18 CLA, 7 Leaving Care and 1 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking young person
- IROs have occasionally helped young people to co-chair their reviews. This is an area which will be further expanded and a meeting has been planned with the Participation Officer for CLA to progress this
- IROs have begun to meet with young people outside of the date of the review meeting in order to plan how best to respond to their views and wishes during the review process.

In addition to the above, key information is extracted from the consultation forms to reflect on themes and issues raised by CLA.

For the period 1 April 2011 to 8 November 2011 the responses from 105 reviews for CLA aged 4 -15 and 72 for CLA aged 16 -17 were collated.

Out of the 105 responses, some of the highlights for the 4 -15 age group were:

- 10 said that they felt they were 'just about' safe in their placement. 7 said 'not at all' and 2 said 'not really'. 86 said 'yes definitely'. The feedback from this section was followed up immediately. The care provided by the placement was not a factor
- 16 CLA did not like where they lived, 18 said they 'sometimes' liked where they lived and 71 said they did
- 51 CLA wanted changes to the contact arrangements with family, 52 did not



- 56 CLA said that they saw their social worker 'often enough' ,19 said 'not at all' , 20 'not really' and 8 'sometimes'
- 44 CLA said that their views and opinions were listened to 'always', 12 'not at all', 15 'not really' and 30 'usually'
- 65 CLA said that they knew that they could make a complaint if they were unhappy about something, 36 said that they did not know they could make a complaint.

Some of the highlights for the 16-17 age group were:

- 24 CLA said that the Pathway Plan took into account what was important to them, 1 'quite a lot'. 6 said 'not all' and 1 'not much'. 41 did not know whether they had a Pathway Plan
- 30 CLA said that that their views and opinions were 'always' listened to, 27 'usually', 7 'not really' and 8 'not at all'
- 63 CLA felt safe where they were living, 5 'quite safe', 3 'not very safe' and 2 'not at all'
- 55 CLA said that they could follow their religion and customs where they lived, 2 said 'no' and 15 said that it did not apply to them
- 17 CLA said that they could ask for an interpreter if they wanted, 55 said that it did not apply to them.

The feedback from the consultation forms provide valuable information about the experience and perceptions of young people who are in the care system. On the whole the information suggests that most of the younger looked after young people feel safe, they are listened to and well cared for. However, this is against a view that they do not have sufficient contact with their social workers. Feedback is discussed with the young person and Social Worker by the IRO during the review process.

Further development will focus on comparing the views of young people with the recorded analysis by their Social Workers as well from management information.

Further development is required in analysing themes from the consultation forms provided by parents.

### **The number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time**

All reviews during the calendar year were held on time. This is activity that requires close monitoring and coordination.

## Quality Assurance audits

An integral part of the work that IROs do is read files of children looked after. IROs have undertaken formal audits of cases of children prior to their reviews and provided feedback to Social Workers, Team Managers, and Service Managers. Some of the more common recommendations included:

- Recordings would benefit from structured headings, such as Purpose, Areas Covered, Who was Seen, Description of Children and Property, including child's bedroom
- Supervision records would benefit from more analysis and evidence of decisions being tracked
- Work on individual cases would benefit from regular analysis and appraisal by the Social Worker
- Records should clearly clarify an audit trail of how and who was involved in decision making
- Case files should evidence that reports and assessments are provided to parents and other professionals.

These themes have been passed and discussed with the respective Social Workers and managers and have also been fed into the other formal audit action plans developed by the Local Authority and the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

The IRO manager has contributed to the LSCB multi agency audits and the IROs to a further multi agency audit of Child Protection, CLA, and Children in Need audit in October 2011. The findings of the audits undertaken by the IROs mirror the themes identified by the multi agency audits and challenge panels:

- The need to ensure analysis in recordings, supervision and multi-agency meetings
- Records need to show the reasoning for how and when children were seen
- Planning needs to be done in collaboration with partners
- Improved recording of decision making in all settings, including recording, supervision and meetings
- Needs for a balance between working with parents and listening to the world as seen by the child
- Evidence of contingency planning and responding to new information and circumstances.

Further developments planned are as follows:

- IROs will participate in the monthly audits as prescribed in the Quality Assurance Strategy and Plan in Children's Services February 2012 - March 2013
- IROs have developed a monitoring checklist for reviews that will be forwarded to Social Workers and Team Managers following each review
- There is a programme of reflective practice development in social work teams with practitioners and Team Managers
- Themes will be reported to Senior Managers by way of the Performance Management Meetings on a quarterly basis.

### **The local dispute resolution process and an analysis of particular dispute**

A protocol is in place through which issues of practice and standards identified by the IROs are resolved. The protocol is an agreement between the IRO service and operational managers in relation to the type of issues that can be taken up and at what level in the organisation. The expectation is that any issue should be resolved between the respective IRO and operational manager in the first instance. If this is not possible to achieve the protocol is instigated at Stage 1. The protocol is then moved to Stage 2 if it requires the involvement of the IRO manager and respective Service Managers.

In 2011, a total of 4 Stage 1 protocols were instigated, 1 of which moved to a Stage 2:

#### Child 1: Stage 1

Incomplete care plan  
 Incomplete PEP  
 Incomplete health plan  
 Incomplete invitation list  
 CLA visits to be recorded.

#### Child 2: Stage 1

Incomplete care plan  
 Incomplete PEP  
 Incomplete health plan  
 Incomplete invitation list  
 CLA visits to be recorded.

#### Child 3: Stage 1

No SW report available prior to the review  
 No invite list completed  
 No care plan  
 No details of when PEP to be undertaken  
 No Placement Plan/Agreement available.

#### Child 4: Stage 2

Young Person not visited within statutory timescales following initial placement.

There has been a significant decrease in the number of times the Resolution Protocol has been used from the previous year. There were 17 Stage 1 protocols in 2010, 2 of which moved to Stage 2.

The decrease in numbers can be attributed to the following:

- IROs and the Children in Need Team Managers arranged a number of meetings to discuss interface issues and how practice issues identified by the IROs could be resolved at an early stage
- It was agreed that pre protocol communications would speed up the resolution process, preventing a need to go into Stage 1
- There was an understanding that meetings between the IRO, IRO Manager, and the respective Team Manager, Service Managers, represented the best way to resolve such complex matters thus avoiding a further escalation of the protocol.

No case has formally required the direct involvement of a Divisional Director.

#### **Whether any resource issues are putting children at risk the delivery of a quality service to all children looked after (CLA)**

No single resource issue that is directly managed by Children Services has been identified which placed children at risk. The IROs were, however, instrumental in highlighting a series of concerns about the provision and support by an independent provider of supported housing which resulted in ceasing the use of that resource.

In terms of quality assurance the new Children Services operating model will have processes in place to ensure that all children, including CLA are protected and that their well being is promoted. The IROs will have an important role in monitoring the functions of the Local Authority in this respect and to highlight practice and service delivery issues.

The IRO service participated in a review in November 2011 of how the health needs of CLA are addressed.

The multi agency audits have highlighted a number of issues which are pertinent to the role of the IROs as independent chairs and in respect of their responsibilities to track cases between reviews. In particular, it was not clear from the records what actions the IRO took in between and leading up to the reviews. As a result IROs now ensure that all communications and discussions outside of the review meetings are clearly recorded in the child's electronic records.

IROs conscientiously track cases, particularly of concern, between reviews and bring those concerns to the attention of the relevant Social Workers,

Managers and IRO manager. It is accepted that this relationship can result in differences of views. There is regular dialogue between the IRO service and operational managers about how each other's roles continue to be constructive as well as supportive. However it is also a requirement that the resolution protocol be escalated where necessary and that it is evidenced. It is important that Senior Managers support the IROs in bringing practice issues to their notice. The Corporate Director of Children's Services has emphasised the importance of developing a culture where there is challenge and continuous learning.

Further development is required to promote the influence of the IROs in this and in the following areas to demonstrate impact and outcomes for young people:

- IROs have taken steps to ensure that all communications and interviews with young people are recorded separately to the review paperwork
- As already indicated the IROs will use the monitoring check list to inform Social Workers and Managers of outstanding matters which will also be reported to Senior Management at quarterly intervals
- The IROs, in line with all social work teams, are encouraged to record how their intervention contributes to better outcomes for children. The scheme is called capturing 'golden nuggets' - focusing on impact and outcomes. The examples will be highlighted in future annual reports.

### **The Overview of the work in respect of CLA and the role of the IRO Service**

#### **The IRO team takes part in the following forums and activities:**

- The IRO manager is a member of the LSCB Quality Assurance Group Sub Group
- The Corporate Parenting Panel meets quarterly. Officers provide updates as requested and of relevance to the overview role of the Panel. Management Performance information is a standing agenda item. The IRO manager is one of the officers who attend Panel
- Children Services lead on the Life Chances Forum, a partnership meeting which considers outcomes for CLA and which reports directly to the Corporate Parenting Panel. The IRO manager attends the Life Chances Forum
- The Children's Safeguarding and Review Unit administers both the Adoption and Fostering Panels. The IRO manager is the Vice Chair of the Adoption Panel

- The Children's Safeguarding and Review Unit administers the Permanency Tracking Panel which tracks all cases which may or are in proceedings. There is IRO attendance at these meetings
- Children Services Service Managers hold monthly performance management meetings to ensure that we are on track with outcomes and targets, including those of CLA. The IRO currently manager attends these meetings
- IROs are linked with specific teams and meet regularly with managers to discuss particular issues and trends
- An IRO coordinates training for Social Workers and Managers on the review process and role of the IRO
- IROs work closely with children advocates and the Complaints Unit to ensure that issues raised by young people are resolved satisfactorily
- IROs and Child Protection Chairs undertake the investigation of complaints as required.

## **Recommendations**

### **Participation of Children and Parents**

- The IRO service should analyse the reasons why some parents do not attend reviews and make any necessary recommendations for practice and service delivery
- The IRO service should review the process by which CLA are consulted to compliment the work of the IROs in preparing young people in taking part in reviews

### **The quality of participation and views of CLA and parents**

- Further development needs to focus on comparing the views of young people with the recorded analysis by their Social Workers as well from management information. A briefing paper will be presented to staff and managers
- The IRO service will analyse themes from the consultation forms provided by parents.

### **Quality Assurance audits**

- The IROs will participate in the monthly audits as prescribed in the Quality Assurance Strategy and Plan in Children's Services February 2012 - March 2013
- A monitoring checklist for reviews will be forwarded to Social Workers and Team Managers following each review

- Themes identified from audits, the use of the local dispute resolution process, and from the monitoring chair's checklists will be reported to Senior Managers by way of the Performance Management Meetings on a quarterly basis.

### **The local dispute resolution process**

- IROs will ensure that all communications and interviews with young people are recorded separately to the review paperwork
- IROs will use the monitoring check list to inform Social Workers and Managers of outstanding matters which will also be reported to Senior Management at quarterly intervals
- The IROs will record how their intervention contributes to better outcomes for children and reported in the Annual Report
- The IRO Manager and Service Manager, Quality Assurance and Service Improvement will consider how the role of the IRO can be enhanced and incorporated into the Quality assurance Framework.
- The Service Manager Quality Assurance and Service Improvement will provide monthly updates to Divisional Directors on the progress of cases going through the dispute resolution process.

## **Section 3 – Further Information**

None

## **Section 4 – Financial Implications**

There are no new financial implications

## **Section 5 – Corporate Priorities**

The corporate priority is to improve support for vulnerable young people and children

## **Section 6 - Statutory Officer Clearance**

Name: Emma Stabler



on behalf of the  
Chief Financial Officer

Date: 26 June 2012

Name: Helen Ottino



on behalf of the  
Monitoring Officer

Date: 27 June 2012

## **Section 7 - Contact Details and Background Papers**

**Contact:** Jonathan Williams, Service Manager, Quality Assurance and Service Improvement. Telephone: 0208 420 9250  
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**Background Papers:** None