

# **Report of the Assistant Director (Children's Specialist Services) to the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel to be held on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2015.**

**J**

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**Subject:****Annual report for the Independent Reviewing Officer Service 2013-14****Summary statement:**

This report examines the work of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) who review the care plans for all Looked After Children in Bradford. The report presents performance data from the IRO Annual Report and demonstrates the robust oversight of care planning in Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

The production of an IRO Annual Report is required under the regulations contained in the IRO Handbook. The report should provide evidence as to the effectiveness of the reviewing service, examine the quality of the reviews offered to young people and set targets for the development of the service.

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## **1. SUMMARY**

- 1.1** This report examines the work of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) who review the care plans for all Looked After Children in Bradford. The report presents performance data and demonstrates the robust oversight of care planning in Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1** There are currently 12 IRO's which is 11.2 full time equivalents. In 2013-14, 95% of Looked After Children's reviews were held within the statutory timeframe specified in the IRO National Handbook. This is improved performance over the 93.8% achieved in 2012/13. Timeliness of reviews is a performance indicator that is reported nationally and is checked by Ofsted as part of their inspection process.

- 2.2** The most recent Ofsted report from the inspection in February/March 2014 concluded that;

*“Independent Reviewing Officers are skilled and experienced, which results in children's reviews being chaired effectively. 95% of children's reviews take place on time and IROs challenge workers, managers and the Local Authority appropriately. They ensure that children's views and assessed needs are central to the care planning process.”*

*DFE, May 2014, para 69*

## **3. REPORT ISSUES**

The production of an IRO Annual Report is required under the regulations contained in the IRO Handbook. The report should provide evidence as to the effectiveness of the reviewing service, examine the quality of the reviews offered to young people and set targets for the development of the service.

The Independent Reviewing Officer Service was allocated additional resource at the end of 2012 with 2 additional posts. This allows currently for individual caseloads of between 85-90 children whilst the IRO Handbook advises 60-70 cases as reasonable.

## **4. OPTIONS**

None for consideration.

## **5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**

An effective IRO Service is required in order to obtain a “Good” or “Outstanding” rating from Ofsted.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- (1) That the work undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officer Service during the last twelve months be endorsed.
- (2) That the improved levels of participation of Looked After Children in their reviews aided by the use of Viewpoint, the online consultation tool, be welcomed.
- (3) That the priorities around quality and service delivery that need to be addressed in 2015 to ensure that the IROs continue to provide a robust challenge to care planning for all children Looked After by the Authority, as set out in Document “J”, be endorsed.

## **7. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None.

## **8. NOT FOR PUBLICATION DOCUMENTS**

None.

## **9. APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 – Annual report of the Independent Reviewing Team 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013-31<sup>st</sup> March 2014

<b>REPORT TO Corporate Parenting Panel</b>			
<b>Date of Meeting</b>	4 <sup>th</sup> March 2015	<b>Agenda item Reference</b>	
<b>Title</b>	Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Team April 1 <sup>st</sup> 2013 to March 31 <sup>st</sup> 2014		
<b>Submitted by</b>	Frank Hand – Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing Unit, Local Authority Designated Officer		
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**IRO Annual Report April 2013 – March 2014**

“At the heart of the IROs role is the child’s review: It is by making sure that reviews are timely and focussed on the child’s needs that IROs can significantly improve care planning but what happens before and after the review is also crucially important. It is through the pre and post review processes, as well as the review meeting itself, that IRO maintain an overview of the child’s experience of care. It is only with the knowledge acquired through these processes and ongoing involvement with a case, that they can make an informed judgement about care planning decisions.”

NCB Research 2014

**Purpose of Service and Legal Context**

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service has responsibility for ensuring that the Care Plans for Looked after Children match their assessed needs. They are guided by the legal framework established by the Care Planning Regulations and the IRO Handbook introduced in 2011. The IRO has now a much more developed role providing the Looked After Child with more in-depth monitoring and follow up. The IRO is required to see the child and ensure that drift or delay in delivering care plans is promptly addressed.

Earlier this year the National Children’s Bureau (NCB) published an extensive piece of research in respect of IROs entitled,

**“The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England.**

NCB, Mar 2014

This research concluded that, “...the IRO role in ensuring high quality care planning is yet to be fully realised.”

The study does point out that the IRO role is a work in progress and that there are several ways that IROs can and do make a positive difference to the lives of children who are Looked After (CLA):-

- Overseeing care plans of individual children and using a variety of tactics from persuasion to overt challenge to make sure a child's needs are met.
- Acting as a resource for colleagues, as experienced social workers with specialist expertise in the needs of Looked After Children.
- Identifying systemic or resource deficiencies in the service to Looked After Children and lobbying for improvements.
- Working proactively to develop the service to Looked After Children through innovation.

There has been an ongoing national debate regarding the independence of a reviewing service sited within the local authority whose practice it is supposed to monitor and if necessary challenge. Mr Justice Peter Jackson, speaking at the National Association of IRO's (NAIRO) conference in September 2013, stated that the IRO brief is rooted in challenge to the local authority which employs them.

"They can achieve valuable change by insisting on doing what they are there to do, which is to hold the local authority fearlessly to account."

Above all the IRO is required to listen to the child and ensure that their thoughts and feelings are central to the review process.

### **Profile of the IRO Service in Bradford**

Currently Bradford employs 12 IROs, 10 fulltime and 2 part time (11-2 FTE). The team was expanded 18 months ago with the recruitment of 2 full time posts to give the current establishment. The team are all experienced practitioners with 5 years post qualification experience as required by the IRO Handbook.

IROs in Bradford do not take on any additional tasks such as chairing Child Protection Conferences or conducting foster carer reviews as IROs do in other authorities. The research evidence from both Ofsted and NCB suggests that dedicated IROs, focussed solely on the reviewing task, provide a better service than those whose attention is diverted by other work.

The IRO team in Bradford has remained stable which has been a positive for Looked after Children. Other staff around a child may change over time whilst the IRO is often the person that has known the child the longest and has a clear knowledge of their history. This continuity has been assisted by relatively low levels of sickness.

In terms of the diversity of the IROs there are a mix of male and females nearly at the same levels as the population of Looked After Children. 42% of

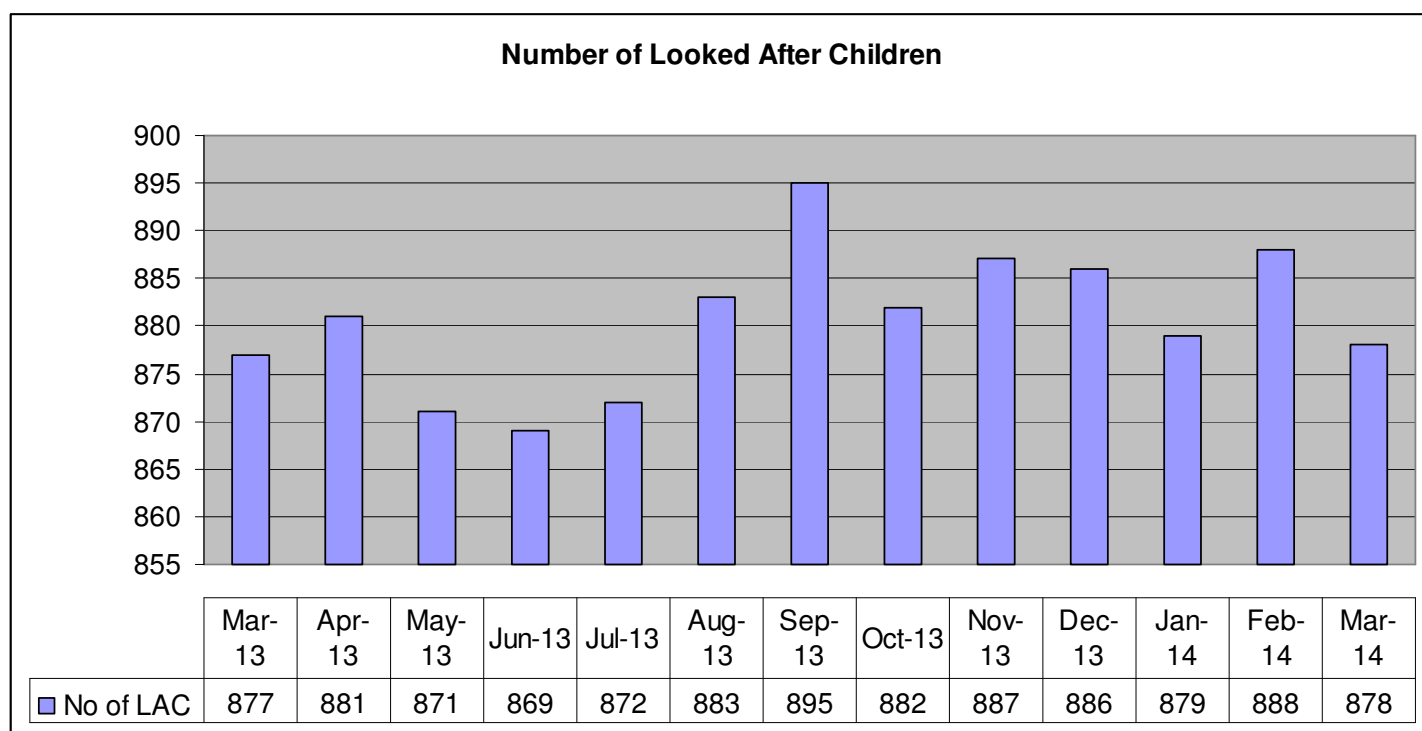
IROs are female and 58% male; 47% of Looked After Children are female and 53% male. We currently don't have any IROs from a BME community although we do have IROs from European and Eastern European backgrounds. It is likely that the team will have the opportunity to recruit an additional part time staff member in the coming year as there is an IRO in the process of reducing hours. This will be an opportunity to recruit a suitable candidate to enhance the diversity of the IRO group.

The work is allocated on rotation throughout the group. We do not have IROs that specialise in specific types of referrals, for example children with disability or unaccompanied asylum seekers. In practice this has allowed each IRO a chance to gain experience across the broad range of Looked After Children.

IROs have made space to address other key aspects of the work for example participation, the Department's response to sibling groups and maintaining links with IRO in the region through a regional practitioners group. This report has been produced to the most recent format circulated to the Regional IRO Manager's Group.

### **Quantitative Information about the IRO Service in Bradford**

#### **Looked After Children's Population over 2013/14**



A total of 1,174 children have been through Bradford's care system in the 12 months April '13 – March '14.

The number of children Looked After at the end of 2013/14 was 878 compared with 877 at the start of the year. The slight increase in overall numbers reflects strong permanency planning for children in care and a safe robust gate keeping process by managers in Children's Specialist Services which ensures that a child only comes into the care system when it is

absolutely necessary. The graph illustrates the variation in numbers throughout the year, month to month.

In 2013-14 318 children started to be looked after; this was an increase of 27% on last year's figure of 251 whilst 327 children and young people ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 2014, an increase of 20% on last year (272).

Whilst overall numbers of Children Looked After has been relatively stable there has been a significant rise in children subject to a Child Protection Plan over the past year.

There will be close monitoring of overall Looked After numbers to pick up any sustained increase in children becoming Looked After.

### **Age and Gender of the Looked After population**

The primary cause for children becoming Looked After is abuse and neglect, 87% of the Looked after Children 2012/13 were in care for these reasons.

	Gender		
Age band	Girls	Boys	Total
Under 1	16	26	42
1 to 4	85	94	179
5 to 9	96	106	202
10 to 15	158	161	319
16 to 17	65	71	136
<b>Total</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>878</b>

Compared to last year the Looked After population has changed relatively little with fewer under 1s coming into care: 42 in 2013-14 compared to 63 in 2012-13. The other significant change has been an increase in the number of 5-9 year olds an increase of 16 up to 202 from 186 last year.

### **The Reviewing Task**

The IRO Handbook specifies a caseload range for IROs setting it between 50 and 70 depending on complexity. This allows the IRO to address the wider monitoring and follow up responsibilities required under the IRO Handbook. Bradford has made every effort to reduce caseloads by providing additional staff, simple mathematics; dividing the overall Looked After population by the 11.2 FTE available gives an average caseload of 78 per IRO. This would of course be dependent on no one being absent due to illness, training or having to travel to out of authority reviews. In practice IRO caseloads are currently in the 80-90 range. This impacts on IRO tasks for example visiting all looked After Children where the current practice is to prioritise children where there are specific concerns about them in placement.

The IRO task is a comprehensive one and there will be a number of factors that affect service delivery. The IRO Handbook specifies the elements that comprise the role:-

“The provision of a quality service to each looked after child requires the IRO to have

1. Sufficient time to consult with all the relevant adults, including foster carers, before each review;
2. Read all the relevant documentation before each review;
3. Meet with the child in a meaningful way before the review (this may involve meeting with the child on a different day in advance of the review);
4. Chair all meetings that make up the review;
5. Provide a full record of the review;
6. Complete quality assurance documentation;
7. Undertake any follow up work after the review;
8. Monitor drift;
9. Alert the local authority in writing of areas of poor practice;
10. Consult with the social worker and the child, following a significant change;
11. Resolve concerns informally, implementing the local dispute resolution process
12. Where necessary; travel to meetings; and
13. Undertake training and attend meetings for the purpose of consultation and professional development.”

IRO Handbook, DCSF, 2010, Sec 7.14

### **Timeliness**

In 2013-14 95% of Looked after Children had their reviews held on time. 95% was the target set at the start of the year and performance has improved on 2012-13 when it was at 93.8%. Holding meetings within the regulatory timescales does not guarantee that the Care Plan will be effectively deployed but it does ensure that the plan is regularly scrutinised and that agencies can be called to account for their work. The timeliness of reviews is audited by OFSTED: this year’s inspection report notes,

*“Independent reviewing officers are skilled and experienced, which results in children’s reviews being chaired effectively. 95% of children’s reviews take place on time and IROs challenge workers, managers and the local authority appropriately. They ensure that children’s views and assessed needs are central to the care planning process.” (para 69)*

This reflects the hard work of the IRO group in ensuring that Looked After Children reviews are prioritised. In practice, reviews can get cancelled for a range of reasons beyond the control of the social worker or IRO. The practice of booking shorter review periods (2.5 months and 5 months) does usually work however this year IROs have had to cope at times with multiple cancellations this makes the achievement of this target all the more notable.



The late notification of a child becoming Looked After has not proved a significant factor on performance this year. Fieldwork colleagues have, in the main, managed to keep the unit informed about children entering the care system. Where there have been “lates” the matter has been raised with the practitioners concerned.

### **Participation of children in their reviews**

In the coming year the introduction of an IRO Manager will allow greater focus on other quality issues for example agencies’ preparation for LAC reviews and children’s participation to drive further improvement. This will build on work in progress as this year has seen increased efforts to enable children to communicate their wishes and feelings in their reviews. IROs working in conjunction with Voiceability, the children’s advocacy service commissioned by the Bradford, have made closer links with the Children in Care Council to promote greater understanding of the IRO role. In one specific piece of work they helped to design a Participation Pack to assist younger children to have more control within their meetings. A number of children have chaired or part chaired their review in conjunction with the IRO.

The Children Looked After return to Department of Education gives the outcome for participation at 85%. This is an improvement on last year’s figure which was 82% to last year’s figures. This is calculated on the reviews for the cohort of children aged between 4 and 18 years who are reviewed by the IRO team. In 66% of the reviews the child attended and their views were directly sought. In 14% of the reviews the child neither attended nor sent their views. This tends to occur in older children moving towards independence where engagement can be an issue. IROs continue to offer various methods of participation to this group in an attempt to include them as fully as possible in their review.

### **Viewpoint**

Bradford has been an innovative authority in deploying “Viewpoint,” an on-line consultation tool, in order to give Looked After Children an additional means of voicing their wishes and feelings about the care they receive. There is no one method that will consistently facilitate a child’s participation but it is important that there are a range of options available.

Usage of “Viewpoint” is at an all time high at 54%. It is offered as a voluntary option to all Looked After children between the ages of 4 and 18 years. There is also a specially designed version for use with children who have communication difficulties. “Viewpoint” has proved very useful in allowing children and young people to communicate their wishes over sensitive issues that they might struggle to bring up in a standard Looked after Child review or in a conversation with their Social worker.

“Viewpoint” development is guided by the Project Board and promoted via the User Group. We have a performance target to increase usage to 65%. We are doing this by analysing cyclical slow periods for uptake during the year and then doing additional promotion to social workers and IROs emphasising the need to complete “Viewpoint” ahead of these key times.

## **Aggregated Data**

One of the additional strengths of “Viewpoint” is that there is the facility to produce aggregated data reports looking at the specific responses of a particular age group or look at responses around a particular issue for example help with homework or how safe children feel within their placements. A specific report was commissioned by Group Service Manager for Care Management regarding Bradford’s pledge to Looked after Children in preparation for inspection.

Bradford’s Children’s Pledge includes the following undertakings:-

- Support into adulthood and independence at a pace to suit us
- Support in all education models
- Being involved in decision making
- Workers being open and honest about issues that affect us
- Support to be kept safe
- Support in reaching our dreams
- Promise to make sure that we know why we are in care
- Ensure we are listened to
- Support us with issues around our family and contact, especially when things do not go to plan

The “Viewpoint” aggregated report provides solid evidence that Bradford is delivering good outcomes in many of these areas. The IRO role in promoting the use of “Viewpoint” and using the questionnaires in reviews to assist the meeting to focus on the child’s views has helped to drive this process. If we take an example like education the research across the age groups demonstrates the good progress the authority is making as a corporate parent,

“In Bradford, responses for the 4-6, 7-9, and 10-15 groups have been consistently positive in relation to attending and being happy at school, and receiving support from carers with education.”

Bradford has made good progress and has the opportunity to do more. Over the year there has been significant work done to ensure that all Looked After Children have an up to date Personal Education Plan and IROs have supported this and followed up where the plan has not been updated or completed to a sufficiently high standard.

## **Challenge by IRO’s**

IROs are required to challenge the local authority where they believe that the assessed needs of a Looked After Child are not being met. The picture in this respect is demonstrably improving over the last three years. It can be hard at times for IROs to evidence the day to day challenge that they offer. There is an expectation that IROs attempt to settle disputes or disagreements over Care Plans informally in the first instance. If this is not possible then the next

stage is to raise an IRO alert which is a written notification to the social worker and the relevant team manager to address the IRO's concern.

This year there were 28 alerts issued in respect of 40 children, a significant increase over last year's outturn.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of alerts</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>
<b>2011/12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2012/13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2013/24</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>40</b>

The alerts forms have a listing of 14 specific concerns linked to review processes plus an "other" category to ensure that all concerns can be captured. There may be more than one concern about a child or sibling group so an alert can have several issues from the list. In the past year IROs have issued alerts under the following categories:-

- A1. Preparation for Child Care Review = 10
- A2. Non-completion/failure to meet the timescale in review decisions = 15
- A3. Assessment = 4
- A4. Lack of comprehensive Care Plan by 2<sup>nd</sup> Review = 4
- A5. Lack of evidence of Corporate Parenting to meet the Care Plan= 2
- A6. Permanency Planning within timescales = 3
- A7. Family Finding and Placement search = 4
- A9. Education Provision /PEP =2
- A10.Placement choice and/or standard of care = 4
- A13. Safeguarding concerns = 3
- A15. Other =12

The IRO's job is make sure there is no delay or drift in cases hence the non completion/failure to meet the timescale for review decisions features significantly in respect of alerts. The evidence from the IRO alerts system is the IROs are assertive and willing to pursue issues around poor practice and inadequate services to Looked after Children. The IRO Handbook is very clear about their responsibility to pursue drift and any failure to meet a child's assessed needs, irrespective of resource questions. Analysis of the IRO alerts provides solid evidence that the IRO group are discharging this responsibility.

The task now facing the IRO service is to drive improvements in the service in respect of the deficits highlighted by the alerts system. In practice the issues detailed above are usually resolved within a working week to the satisfaction of the IRO. To date there have not been any cases where the IRO has taken independent legal advice in respect of concerns regarding the local authority's failure to offer a child adequate care. In practice such challenges are rare nationally.

Both the NCB and OFSTED research on IROs and challenge suggests that this is the area that causes the most dissatisfaction for IROs. There is

uncertainty about when informal processes should become formal challenges and a lack of confidence regarding the IROs security in challenging their own local authority. In Bradford the challenge process needs to be developed and there needs to be further work regarding the preparation work for children's reviews.

### **IRO Team Work Programme**

In the coming year the IRO service needs to establish itself more firmly as a driving force for improvement in service delivery to Looked After Children.

The IRO team will have the benefit of a new manager later in 2014 who will take over the day to day running of the service. The new IRO Manager will be joining a developing service at a time when the demands on the IRO to demonstrate more proactive and assertive challenge and to present clear evidence of added value have never been greater. The latest research challenges the IROs to better evidence the contribution that they make to ensuring the quality of planning for Looked After Children.

There are priorities around quality and service delivery that will need to be addressed by IROs. The following priorities need to be addressed in 2014-15

1. At regional level the IRO manager can contribute to the development of an agreed set of standards for IROs. Despite the establishment of the role and its crucial contribution there is still little formal requirement or definition of skill set or guidance as to how one goes about developing a better, more effective, IRO. In the past year a one day training package was commissioned using the training company re-construct. However this was a one off and there is unlikely to be funding available to repeat the exercise. The introduction of the Birmingham University Course for IROs is welcome but there needs to be a more local/regional equivalent.
2. There is a task to explain the role and practice expectations of the IRO service to both practitioners and this should include age appropriate explanations to children and young people. This is clearly highlighted in the NCB research. In the coming year the service will promote this understanding more proactively firstly by taking the information in this annual report to the Children in Care Council but also by organising an event with fieldwork colleagues to enhance their understanding of the IRO role.
3. The results from the IRO alerts system will be developed into a separate report which will be used to close the loop at an organisational level with fieldwork colleagues. This will ensure that the learning about the type of issue and the frequency that it arises is communicated to social workers and their managers.
4. The quality assurance aspect of the IRO service is insufficiently developed and further work is needed to address this. There were attempts during 2013-14 to survey service users regarding their experience of the IRO's work but this proved inadequate. The surveys had insufficient depth and did not provide enough detail on which to base changes or developments

of the service. The NCB research asks for a more sophisticated method of quality assurance involving feedback from practitioners, children and young people and direct observation of IROs in practice. A comprehensive system will be designed and implemented in 2014/15.

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