



Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report

April 2011-March 2012

Author(s):	Isabel Wilks Team Manager QA/CRS
Date agreed:	7.6.12
Agreed by:	CSMT

1.0 Introduction

The Contribution of IRO's to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Children in Care

- 1.1 The IRO Handbook – Statutory Guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers and Local Authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of Looked after Children states that the IRO Manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Panel.
- 1.2 This report provides an opportunity to highlight areas of good practice and areas which require improvement, identify emerging themes and trends, describes areas of work which the service has prioritised during the year, and will prioritise in the coming year,

2.0 Purpose of Service and Legal Context

- 2.1 The responsibilities of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in relation to the review of cases of Looked after Children are defined within Section 26 of the Children Act 1989, which was subsequently modified by s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and s.10 of the Children and Young People Act 2008. Statutory Guidance, *The IRO Handbook*, was issued in April 2010, and came into force in April 2011.
- 2.2 In Central Bedfordshire the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) function is undertaken by Review Managers in Conference and Review (CRS) within the Quality Assurance Service. Review Managers undertake two main areas of work: Chairing of Child Protection Conferences and Looked after Children's Reviews. In addition they chair a small number of short break reviews when short breaks are provided under s.20 of the Children Act (primarily for children with disabilities).
- 2.3 Changes in relation to the guidance governing Short Breaks in 2011 meant that most short breaks can now be provided under s.17 of the Children Act. Conference and Review, together with the Children with Disabilities Team, undertook a review between April and June 2011 of all the cases involving children receiving short breaks in accordance with the new criteria, and agreed a process for decision making and transfer to a Child in Need process. In over 90% of cases short breaks are now provided within the Child in Need process. Review Managers still review the small number of cases where a child with disabilities is deemed to be looked after in accordance with the guidance; at the time of writing this report there were just 6 cases.
- 2.4 The statutory duties of the IRO are to:
 - Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case;
 - Participate in any review of the child's case;
 - Ensure that the ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
 - Perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.
- 2.5 The IRO's primary focus is to quality assure the care, planning and review process and to ensure that the child's wishes and feelings are given full consideration. IRO's are

qualified social workers with sufficient practice and supervisory experience to undertake this authoritative professional role.

The Review Process

- 2.6 The review will typically comprise a meeting chaired by the IRO and attended by all the relevant people in the child's life. The social worker, child, carers, parents, teacher, health representatives and other involved professionals may all attend, or some information may be sought prior to the review in order for the meeting to be child centred and involving only the key people.
- 2.7 The IRO will usually meet with the child before the review and the child will also have the opportunity to complete a consultation leaflet. The leaflet asks a series of simple questions about the child's views and wishes and can be completed by them with the assistance of their carer or social worker ahead of the review to enable them to express their views as part of the review process. The leaflets are available in 3 age-appropriate versions (ages 5-8, 9-15 and 16+) and are sent out with the review invitation.
- 2.8 The review is a review of the Care Plan. The purpose is to ensure the Care Plan fully reflects the child's current needs, and that the actions it sets out are consistent with the Local Authority's legal responsibilities towards the child as corporate parents. The plan must set out the long term plans for the child 's upbringing and the arrangements made to meet the child's developmental needs in relation to health, education, emotional and behavioural development, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation and self-care skills The review documentation includes the Care Plan and a record of the review process which includes a report from the social worker, a record of the meeting and the recommendations made, which is completed by the IRO. This will identify who needs to do what and when, review progress made against previous recommendations, and consider contingency plans.

3.0 Quantitative Information about the IRO Service

- 3.1 On 1 April 2009 when Central Bedfordshire Council became a unitary authority, the LAC population stood at 132 children & young people. The numbers of Looked after Children have risen steadily since that time. The population at 31 March 2011 stood at 176. The population as at 31 March 2012 stood at 208. This represents a rate per 10,000 populations of 37, up from 31 per 10,000 the previous year. This compares to a national rate of 59 (2010/11), and a statistical neighbour rate of 46.
- 3.2 The increase can be attributed to two main factors – the increase in referrals in line with national social care activity, and the application of more rigour than the legacy authority in applying thresholds and intervening to ensure children are protected from harm.
- 3.3 There were 590 reviews held in respect of 266 children during the year from April 2011 to March 2012. The number of reviews held in respect of any individual child or young person is determined by when they became looked after, in accordance with statutory timescales and any changes of circumstances requiring an additional review.
- 3.4- Composition of the Looked After Children Population. Total 208

Ethnicity

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black	other
CBC Local School Population	91%	4%	2%	2%	1%
National Funded School Population 31/01/11	79%	4%	9%	5%	2%
CBC Children Looked After 31/03/12	85%	5%	3%	3%	4%
National Children Looked After 31/03/11	91%	4%	2%	2%	1%

Age

Age at 31 March 2012					
	BOYS	GIRLS	Total CBC	% CBC	National 31/03/11
Under 1	8	6	14	7%	6%
1-4	22	23	45	22%	18%
5-9	15	17	32	15%	18%
10-15	45	27	72	35%	37%
16-17	30	15	45	22%	21%
18 & over and placed in a community home	0	0	0		
TOTAL	120	88	208	100%	100%
CBC %	58%	42%			
31/03/11 National %	56%	44%			

Legal Status

Legal Status at 31 March 2012			
	CBC	% CBC	National 31/03/11
Care Orders Interim	67	32%	21%
Care Orders Full	51	25%	39%
Voluntary agreements under s.20 (single period of accommodation)	84	40%	31%
Placement Order	6	3%	8%
On remand, committed for trial, or detained	0	0	-
Emergency orders or police protection	0	0	-
TOTAL	208	100%	100%

Placement

Placement at 31 March 2012			
	CBC	% CBC	National 31/03/11
Foster placement with relative or friend Inside local authority	22	73%	74%
Foster placement with relative or friend Outside local authority	7		
Placement with other foster carer Inside local authority	50		
Placement with other foster carer Outside local authority	72		
Secure Unit	1	13%	9%
Homes and hostels	25		
Hostels and other supportive residential placements	0		
Residential schools	3	1%	1%
Other residential settings	2	1%	2%
Placed for adoption (including placed with former foster carer)	3	1%	4%
Placed with own parents	3	1%	6%
In lodgings, residential employment or living independently	20	10%	4%
Absent from agreed placement	0	0%	-
Other placement	0	0%	-
TOTAL	208	100%	100%

Staffing and Workload

- 3.5 The Review Manager establishment was increased in June 2010 to 4.8 FTE in response to a rise during the previous year in numbers of Looked after Children and children subject to a protection plan. The staffing situation continued to be challenging over the next nine months due to maternity leave, staff sickness and delays in the recruitment process. This inevitably had some impact on continuity of IRO provision for some children and young people who experienced a change of IRO.
- 3.6 The position since Feb 2011 is that against the establishment of 4.8 FTE there are now six permanent members of staff equating to 4.3 fte posts (2x FTE 3x 0.6FTE and 1x 0.5FTE). In addition there is one agency member of staff who undertakes primarily Review Manager work but also provides some cover to Allegations Management. This worker has been part of the staff group since May 2010, so over the past year we have had very high continuity of employment and stability in our IRO provision. Our longest serving Review Managers have provided long-term continuity for many years to many of our LAC population. The recent Ofsted report commented 'Some of the young people seen by inspectors praised their reviewing officers and reported that they had been working with them for many years and were the most significant figure in their lives.'
- 3.7 The make-up of the team is comprised 2 male workers 4 female workers. All workers have as required a considerable number of years experience. Within the group there is a wide range of experience, with IRO's previous roles including front line social work with Children with Disabilities, Looked after Children and Child Protection, supervisory and

managerial experience, residential experience and previous work as Children's Guardians.

- 3.8 Several of the team live locally, others in neighbouring authorities. There is a good knowledge of the local area within the team. Workers come from a range of backgrounds but do not fully reflect the ethnic mix of the population. Ideally the workforce would reflect the identity of the young people it is serving, but within a small group a wide representation is not achievable. However within the social work teams there is a wider range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented.
- 3.9 The IRO Handbook provides guidance on caseloads, detailing expectations of the IRO role and advising factors to be taken into account. It estimates that a caseload of 50 to 70 Looked Children would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service.
- 3.10 A complexity in considering caseloads in Central Bedfordshire is that all Review Managers undertake both the IRO role and that of chairing Child Protection conferences. In view of rising numbers in both these groups a review of workloads has been undertaken. There is some variation between workers and over time in the proportion of time spent in the different areas of work but averaged across the period reviewed 48% of time was being spent on the IRO role; 52% on Child Protection. A business case has been presented for an increase in capacity of one full-time post, in addition to the 0.5 post already covered by the agency worker. This will give an establishment of 6.3 fte Review Manager Posts. It is anticipated that this will give 3.3 WTE to the IRO role which with the current LAC population equates to an average caseload of 63 Looked after Children which should facilitate the delivery of a quality service.

4.0 Qualitative Information about the IRO Service

The Timeliness of Reviews

- 4.1 The timing of reviews is specified in regulation. The first review has to be held within 20 working days of the child/young person becoming looked after, the second within 3 months of the first. Subsequent reviews at intervals of no more than 6 months. Reviews will in addition be held if there is a significant change of circumstances or of the care plan.
- 4.2 Performance in respect of timescale has previously been reported against a national indicator, whilst reporting requirements have changed this indicator is still a good measure of performance i.e. ***"of those children who had been looked after for at least 28 days, the percentage whose Reviews had all been on time over the past year"***. This indicator excludes children placed for adoption and only looks at reviews in the current reporting year (since 01 April). Timescales depend on when the child started to be looked after.
The performance target was 95%
CBC 2011/12 Outturn was 194 /199 = 97.5%
- 4.3 There were 5 children and young people who were reported having a late review at the end of the year. The late reviews were all initial reviews. The timescale for the initial review is 20 working days. Several factors have been identified as contributing to these reviews being late:

- The Council does as required have a system in place to ensure that the Manager of the IRO Service is advised that a child has become looked after within two working days. However all 5 of these reviews were late notifications from the operational teams;
- Change of status in a placement with family members – in 3 cases the child was initially living with a family member on an informal basis and then circumstances changed such that the child became looked after. There seems to have been a lack of clarity in respect of the decision making and timely notification of this change.
- Lack of clarity at point of transfer between teams – in 2 cases there had been a change of social worker and team which contributed to a lack of clarity.

Children's Participation

- 4.4 The IRO handbook states that it is expected that the child if s/he is of sufficient age and understanding will be present for the whole of the review, but this will depend on the circumstances of each individual case. The IRO may decide, in consultation with the social worker that attendance of the child is not in the child's best interests. If the child does not attend, other arrangements should be made for their involvement. It is one of the specific responsibilities of the IRO to promote the voice of the child and to ensure their wishes and feelings are represented. The review record will include information on how the child participates and how their wishes and feelings were included. Participation is monitored by recoding a participation code. Children aged under 4 are excluded. For all other children it is expected that they should attend, or that their views should be represented. Ofsted (April 2012) found that Looked after Children are enabled to participate and contribute to their reviews.
- 4.5 Participation is considered an important performance indicator. The PAF C63 Indicator records children and young people who communicated their views specifically for each of their statutory reviews as a percentage of the number of children and young people who had been looked after at 31st March for more than four weeks. The outturn for 11/12 shows that 143/157 =91.7% participated. The monthly reporting data for March 2012 shows that 160/164 = 98.2% children and young people attended their most recent review. This figure is higher, but some of these young people have missed a review earlier in the year. We had set a target of 95% participation in reviews
- 4.6 There are 13 children and young people recorded as having neither attended their review nor having been represented. These young people primarily fall into four groups:
- Three of these are children with disabilities who are not able to verbally communicate their views. The IRO's have observed the young people and sought contributions from their parents & carers as to their wishes and feelings as far as can be ascertained;
 - Three of these are teenagers who were invited and expected to attend, but refused and declined to speak to their reviewing officer(one at two reviews);
 - Four young people are a sibling group who did not attend their first review which was arranged at short notice in the office, and was covered by another IRO due to the allocated IRO's sickness. These children have participated in their subsequent review.
 - Three are young children for whom attendance was not considered appropriate in their particular circumstances .These children have all been seen by their IRO since the review and their views have been represented subsequently.

Parental Participation

4.7 The IRO handbook advises that the IRO should seek the views of birth parents and any other adults with parental responsibility and other significant person's in the child's life, for example extended family members. The record of the review notes those attending and those consulted as part of the review process. The Review Manager also completes a monitoring form which includes qualitative feedback on the quality of practice in respect of appropriate involvement of parents and extended family. The case recording system we had during the reporting period does not provide quantitative information on review attendance. Our case recording system changed on 1.4.12, and in future will provide management information in respect of parental attendance. In response to the requirements of the IRO handbook and need to report on parental participation we created a monitoring form to capture information on participation of parents and connected persons. Over a four month period we have information on attendance at 181 reviews. Not applicable has been recorded where for example the parent is deceased or their whereabouts is unknown.

	Attended	Consulted	Not Applicable	No Consultation	Information not recorded	Totals
Mother	71	52	22	20	16	181
Father	33	34	41	24	49	
Step Parent	2	4	5	1		
Connected person	25	6				
Totals						

Mothers attended or were consulted in 68% of reviews

Fathers attended or were consulted in 37% of reviews.

A step parent or a connected person attended or was consulted in 20% of reviews.

Service User Feedback

4.8 Ofsted found that Individual Looked after Children are positively encouraged to express their views and wishes, and almost all contribute to their review meetings. Most young people responding to a survey for the inspection felt that they are usually or always able to have their say. Looked after Children are encouraged to voice their concerns. Where complaints have been made these have been handled well.

4.9 Conference and Review (CRS) have responded to some individual complaints and contributed to the response to others where a part of the concern was in relation to the review process. Conference and Review have also responded to feedback from individual young people and from the Children in Care Council. Some issues that have arisen are:

- Mistakes in invitations or reports – these have been corrected;
- Challenges from a young person or parent/family member where there is disagreement and conflict between them that impacts on the review arrangements – these have been responded to individually but have also led to wider practice discussions;

- Challenge about how well children and young people are consulted in respect of the practical arrangement for their reviews – this has led to several pieces of work to audit and develop best practice.

5.0 The Conduct of the Organisation in Relation to the Review

- 5.1 Conference and Review (CRS) sit within Quality Assurance Service and the quality assurance role is central to the IRO's responsibilities. The IRO is responsible for monitoring the performance of the Local Authority, including effective challenge of poor practice, and has a crucial role in ensuring that the Council fulfils its responsibilities as a corporate parent for all the children it looks after.
- 5.2 The IRO completes a monitoring form after each review which audits completion of required documentation and appropriateness of Care Plan, in particular whether health and educational needs are identified and met, whether the necessary health checks, Personal Education Plan, and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire have been completed.
- 5.3 In addition qualitative feedback is given in respect of care planning, children's participation, and appropriate involvement with family and partnership working with other agencies. Monitoring forms are sent to the responsible team manager who will address the issues with the social worker in supervision. Feedback on practice will include good practice as well as any areas of concern. The monitoring form is sent to the Team Manager who will share with the social worker in supervision and if any identified actions are needed ensure these are completed.
- 5.4 In addition the Conference and Review Team Manager holds a monthly Quality Assurance meeting with each of the fieldwork Team Managers. The meeting with the LAC team is also attended by managers from the Fostering Team, and from the Adoption Team, which helps to pick up any concerns within placement and to ensure permanency planning is closely monitored. The CRS Team Manager produces a summary report for each meeting, which summarises information from individual monitoring forms, gives an overview, and allows identification of any general issues or concerns. This report is also circulated to the relevant Heads of Service and to the Assistant Director Operations. This process ensures that feedback on practice is shared with the individual worker and manager and an overview is given to Heads of Service and Assistant Director.
- 5.5 Ofsted found that case planning and reviews are effective overall, although further improvement is required to aspects of work, such as the quality of some assessments, pathway plans, personal educational plans and case recording. They also found that monitoring by independent review officers enabled practice on individual cases to be improved.
- 5.6 Ofsted found that permanency planning is evident in all care planning, with good scrutiny and challenge from independent reviewing officers.
- 5.7 Ofsted found that performance management and quality assurance are good. Independent reviewing officers routinely complete monitoring forms following each Looked After Child's review which audits reports provided to the review and appropriateness of the care plan. This is effectively reported to managers to improve practice. Information from monitoring by independent reviewing officers is regularly collated by the quality assurance service in children's social care to identify themes, which are shared with managers to drive service development and improvement.

6.0 Conduct of the Organisation in Relation to the Case

Procedures for Resolution of Concerns

- 6.1 The Central Bedfordshire Conference and Review Service believes in immediate problem solving with social workers and team managers whenever possible and will always begin to address issues in a constructive co-operative manner. Central Bedfordshire already has in place a Quality Assurance process described above through which most concerns will continue to be raised and resolved.
- 6.2 However *The IRO Handbook*, which was issued in April 2010, and came into force in April 2011, strengthens the role of the IRO and requires the authority to have a formal Disputes Resolution Policy.
- 6.3 In the guidance, the IRO has a duty to monitor the Local Authority's performance overall, not just in respect of the review of the child/young person's case. So, the IRO should identify poor practice, and must negotiate with the Local Authority's managers up to the highest level. The IRO is required to consider a referral to the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, where the child/young person's human rights have not been observed. It is not necessary for all efforts to resolve the Dispute through this process to have been unsuccessful, before the IRO does this; rather, it is anticipated that referral to CAFCASS will usually occur when a Dispute raised through this process has not been resolved in a timely way.
- 6.4 If an IRO considers that a matter involves a breach of a child's human rights the matter should immediately be raised as a formal dispute.
- 6.5 Most other concerns will be raised with the Team Manager through the existing Quality Assurance process. A RAG system will ensure that more urgent matters are highlighted.
- 6.6 A failure to respond or a failure to resolve a concern through the QA process will lead to a formal dispute being raised, in accordance with the dispute resolution procedure implemented in 2011.
- 6.7 Conference and Review produced a handout for social workers introducing the Dispute Resolution Procedure and gave a presentation at team meetings in order to promote understanding of the process and of the underlying changes introduced with the IRO Handbook.
- 6.8 As anticipated most concerns continue to be raised and resolved through our quality assurance process. There have been a number of cases where concerns were escalated to Head of Service .
- 6.9 The Quality Assurance service participates in a rolling programme of auditing across all teams.

7.0 Any resource Issues that are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service for Looked after Children

- 7.1 The recent Ofsted inspection found overall effectiveness of services to be adequate. Most outcomes for Looked After Children were judged to be adequate. However health outcomes were judged to be inadequate. No permanent designated doctor or nurse for

Looked after Children was in place at the time of the Inspection to enable the health needs of Looked after Children to be prioritised.

7.2 Ofsted identified concerns about placement availability stating there is insufficient suitable accommodation available to meet the needs of care leavers, with only 93.3% living in suitable accommodation. Ofsted also expressed concern about a recent deterioration in the stability of placements (from 74.2% to 63% of Looked after Children who remain in the same placement for over two years) and Looked after Children being placed out of authority area. Children are only placed in residential provision that is assessed as good or outstanding. However, insufficient choice of placements to meet local needs results in some children being placed out of the area or over 20 miles from their home.

8.0 Annual Work Programme of the IRO Service i.e. Priority Areas for Improvement

8.1 This will reflect the Action Plan arising from the Ofsted Inspection and the Team/Service Plan.

8.2 This will include completing work already started on improving the consultation and review process to better reflect the wishes of young people, working with the operational teams to improve the quality of care plans and ensuring the health needs of Looked after Children are appropriately responded to in a timely manner.