

Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report April 2017 – March 2018

The contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality
Assuring and Improving Services for Children in Care

1.0 Purpose of Service

- 1.1 The Independent Review Officers' (IRO) role is set out in statutory guidance 'The IRO Handbook, 2011'. The IROs primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. The responsibility of the IRO has widened from just the review process to an overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews, challenging drift and delay.
- 1.2 In the National Children's Bureau, research entitled 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England' (March 2014), the foreword written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson makes the following comment:

'The independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO Service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment or whether we are failing.'

- 1.3 The Department of Education 'Fostering Better Outcomes: The Government response to the Education Select Committee report into fostering and Foster Care in England' (July 2018), proposed:

There is potential for IROs to bring about significant practice improvements, alongside their role in ensuring that young people experience the best care from their fostering service. Where IROs are valued and listened to, they provide a legitimate and respected challenge function for individual children's care plans and the wider service delivery (p. 32).

This Annual IRO Report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Service in Central Bedfordshire.

- 1.3 Summary of Key Points:

- A total of 875 reviews were held this year an increase of 3 from 872 last year.
- Timeliness and participation continue to be good.
- A permanent IRO and administrative staff group will ensure excellent continuity to our children.
- IRO caseloads are higher than outlined within statutory guidance, however this is being addressed.
- The quality assurance system, including the dispute resolution process is fully embedded and evidences an improvement in the provision of services to children and young people.
- Impact of the IRO service is illustrated through case examples.
- IROs have responded to the views of young people, captured in the work with the Children in Care Council.

2.0 Professional Profile of the IRO Service

- 2.1 In Central Bedfordshire the Independent Reviewing Officers' function is undertaken by IROs in the Conference and Review Service (CRS) within the Professional Standards function of Children's Services. IROs undertake two main areas of work: chairing of Child Protection Conferences and Looked after Children's Reviews. In addition, a small number of short break reviews when provided under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989

are chaired by an IRO. One worker undertakes the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) role in combination with the Review Officer role. The Fostering Review Officer is a member of this Service and has responsibility to conduct annual and additional reviews of Central Bedfordshire Council foster carers, as required in accordance with statutory requirements.

- 2.2 In March 2017, the Service had an establishment of 7.1 FTE (Full Time Equivalent) permanent IRO's, excluding the LADO function. During the year, several changes to the team occurred to support professional development opportunities and personal requests. In June and September two members of staff reduced their hours by one day (.2 and .1 [shared LADO role] FTE) creating a workforce complement of 6.8 FTE. In November 2017, one member of staff was successfully recruited as a Children's Guardian and this subsequent vacancy was filled in May 2018 by an experienced team manager from the Corporate Parenting Service. During this six-month period the team operated at an establishment of 5.8 FTE, however, the level of stability, depth of knowledge and experience within the team during this period provided continuity to our children.
- 2.3 In terms of diversity the team has a good gender balance reflecting the Looked After children population and their views are listened and responded too.

A female Looked After young person allocated to a male IRO, initially requested a female IRO but her mother who already knew the IRO as he had been allocated to her older son told her daughter 'he is safe you had better to stick with him than change the IRO'. As a result, the young person changed her mind and decided to keep the same IRO.

- 2.4 Workers come from a range of backgrounds but do not fully reflect the ethnic mix of the population. Ideally the workforce would reflect the diversity of the Looked After Children population it is serving, but within a small group, a wide representation has not been achievable. Within the social work teams there is a wider range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented.
- 2.5 All IROs have, as required in statutory guidance, a considerable number of years' experience. IROs previous roles include front line social work with Children with Disabilities, Looked After Children, Child Protection, Leaving and After Care and supervisory and managerial experience, residential experience, fostering experience and previous work as Children's Guardians. The majority of the team live locally or in neighbouring authorities, and there is a good knowledge of the local area within the team.
- 2.6 All of the IROs undertake additional roles and duties, either as representatives of the IRO Service or as part of their wider role. These include:
- Bi-monthly Quality Assurance (QA) Liaison meetings with social work teams as part of the QA strategy.
 - Attendance at Multi Agency Public Protection meetings as the Children's Services representative.
 - Supervision of the Parent Partnership Service which sits within CRS as an off-line management role.
 - Participation in the monthly audit programme.
 - Attendance at quarterly liaison meetings with CAFCASS.

- Supervision of the Foster Care Review Officer.
- Linking with the Children in Care Council (CiCC).
- Representative at various LSCB sub groups, including the Voice of the Child.

3.0 Arrangement for Reviews

- 3.1 The Social Worker and IRO share responsibility for the review.
- 3.2 The IRO Handbook sets the expectation that children and young people are included in an age appropriate way in deciding on the arrangement for the review which is their review.
- 3.3 The CRS is responsible for the following elements of the LAC Review:
 - Deciding who needs to attend the LAC review.
 - Where the review should be held.
 - Arranging the invitations and consultations.
 - Providing reports.
 - Recording the discussion.
 - Ensuring timely distribution of the review record.
 - Involving co-ordination between Social Worker, and administrative staff.

Business processes are set within the work-flow and formatting of Mosaic, the children's case management and recording system.

- 3.4 The amended processes developed by the IRO, Corporate Parenting Services and Mosaic Team are successfully embedded. These processes support the teams to simplify and streamline the procedure, improve the timeliness, and focus on the quality of the recording, ensuring IROs and Social Workers each take responsibility for their part of the process which has improved the timeliness of social work reports for reviews and in review recording. Recent changes have been implemented to support the distribution process.

4.0 Qualitative Information about the IRO Service

4.1 The Timeliness of Reviews

- 4.2 This figure relates to the rolling year with definition from Department for Education, Children looked after return, '*of those children who had been looked after for at least 20 working days, the percentage whose Reviews had all been on time over the past year*'. This indicator excludes children placed for adoption.

97.3% of LAC reviews due were completed on time which is 292 reviews out of a total of 300 (number of LAC, as at 31st March, for whom 1 or more reviews were due during the year and where a review had been completed). This is a slight decrease in performance of 0.3%, (4 reviews) since the previous year attributed to the staffing complement which has been addressed.

- 4.3 The eight were overdue by a few days for a variety of reasons which have been explored and addressed to reduce the risk of any reoccurrence.

- 4.2 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 and the second within 3 months of the first. Subsequent reviews are at intervals of no more than 6 months. In addition, reviews will be held if there is a significant change of circumstances or change of care plan.

5.0 Children's Participation

- 5.1 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. It may be appropriate for a younger child to be observed, or for the IRO to interact with that child through play or reading in a placement setting. If the child's first language is not English, as for example with the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, an interpreter will be provided. A child with disabilities may be observed in school or placement and their needs and feelings discussed with their carers if a direct conversation is not possible.
- 5.2 The Review Record will include information on how the child participates and how their wishes and feelings were included. Participation is monitored by recording a participation code. Children aged under 4 are exempt from this count but IRO's ensure that they seek their views in a variety of ways, such as direct observation and obtaining views from professionals that work with the children. For all other children, it is expected that they should attend or that their views should be represented.
- 5.3 Participation is considered an important performance indicator. This year, 95% of young people participated in their most recent review, a decrease of 1.6% from the previous year. Children and young people are also actively supported and encouraged to 'chair' their reviews and this is an identified area of development.
- 5.4 A total of 10 young people chose not to participate in their reviews, the same number as reported in March 2017. Six young people were missing at the time of the review. Two young people not available, one as they were sectioned because of mental health difficulties and the other was unwell, however both gave their views to the IRO prior to the meeting. Three young people aged 17 refused to attend.

5.5 Work with the Child in Care Council

- 5.6 IROs value and promote the work of the CiCC and send referrals of young people who would like to be part of the CiCC. The IROs attended the arranged CiCC summer activity events, including visits to the cinema, sports centre, 'Gulliver's Land', 'Bounce' and horse riding and celebrated the achievements of the Looked After Children by attending the Children in Care Awards evening. The children and young people said they really valued the opportunity to interact and build meaningful relationships with their IROs and felt that the IROs invested in them by spending this time outside of their statutory duties.

5.7 Advocacy Service

- 5.8 The IRO Handbook states that before every review the IRO is responsible for making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one. In April 2017, the Advocacy Service became part of Central Bedfordshire and is delivered by professionals who are independent of the organisation to provide a service that 'reaches out' to all children and young people and ensure that they are appointed an advocate as identified and when they need.
- 5.9 Advocacy is about supporting children and young people to make sure their rights are respected, and their views and wishes are heard. Advocacy provides an opportunity for views to be listened to and properly considered. The advocate works directly for the young person, not the carers or their Social Worker.
- 5.10 Children and young people with child protection and looked after status are able to request the use of an advocate. Any child or young person requesting an advocate who are known to the children with disabilities team can also use an advocate although many of these children and young people will not have child protection or looked after status.
- 5.11 Between April 2017 – March 2018, there were 101 referrals into the advocacy service. A total 70 new requests for children and young people and 31 re-referrals from young people who wanted to use an advocate again.
- 5.12 The referrals originate from the broad spectrum of social work teams and the young person may re-refer directly to the advocate to seek their support for a subsequent issue/support as they often feel confident enough to self-refer. The IRO informs the young person of the Advocacy Service, but it is ordinarily the social worker who will refer in to the service, not the IRO.
- 5.13 Looked After Children and young people are able to request the use of an advocate, including children with disabilities despite not being looked after or subject to a child protection plan. The majority of the referrals are for 'support at meetings' including Looked After Child Review.

Reason for referral	Numbers referred
Support at meetings	69
Relationships	18
UASC	2
Finance	4
Leaving Care	2
Complaint	2
Placement issues	2
Access to services	1
Support with a name change	1

5.14 Requests for Advocates come from a wide age range of children and young people.

Age of child/young person	How many referrals received for each age
24	1
20	1
19	1
18	2
17	9
16	27
15	15
14	15
13	3
12	4
11	6
10	8
9	3
8	2
7	2
6	2

5.15 Children and Young People have described having an advocate as:

- 😊 ‘Helpful, makes things a lot clearer and understandable’.
- 😊 ‘He can now speak to my social worker to find out what is going on’.
- 😊 ‘Very good at listening, took everything on board’.
- 😊 ‘I feel having an advocate helped me a lot in meetings. She helped and encouraged me to speak, when I found it difficult. I wouldn’t have been able to do this without the support of an advocate’.
- 😊 ‘If you feel shy and you don’t want to go to a meeting the advocate can go for you and explain what you would like’.

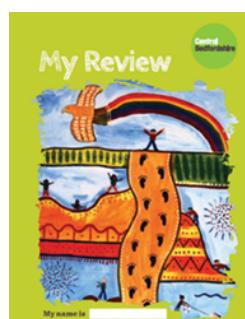
A young boy in long term foster care requested some support to discuss an increase in contact with his family at his review. An advocate attended his review and as a result the IRO recommended an increase of contact with his mum from 2.5hrs to 3hrs in the community and planned that an extra group contact with his siblings would take place.

The young person was extremely happy about the changes, and with the support of his advocate and recommendations of the IRO these changes were implemented. The social worker felt: ‘the outcomes were positive and beneficial for the young person.’

5.16 The Voice of the Child

5.17 Consultation booklets are sent out to all young people before their Looked After Children's Review. The booklets were designed by our CiCC and encourage young people to give their views before the meeting about their life and being in care which is then discussed in the meeting. Some young people use the spaces to draw pictures to give their views. This feedback was evaluated, and key themes were identified.

- The majority of children and young people said that they were happy with the current arrangements and where they lived. When they were asked if there anything else that you would like to know about being in care, most children and young people did not have any questions, however a few asked questions including '*why their parent was unable to care for them?*' and, '*how long they will I be in this foster placement?*' One said, '*my sister is still annoying me*' and went on to say I would like '*no sister to be with me*'. Of the sample, 90% said that they felt safe in their placement.
- Most children and young people said that they liked school especially being with their friends, the teachers, some subjects and lunch. When asked if they could change anything a few said the '*subjects*', '*hot dinners*' and '*other children being naughty to me*'. When asked if they felt safe at school, this reduced to 60% of the same sample group of children and young.
- They all felt that they were healthy, and the majority said that they have attended their health appointment and would know who to contact if they were unwell.
- The majority of children and young people said that they were happy with how often they saw their Social Worker and said that they would contact them using the phone, email, text or via their foster carer.
- The children and young people said that in their spare time they liked to see their friends, do activities or watch TV or play computer games.
- As highlighted in last year's report, the most significant area of concern identified is that a large number of children and young people said that they were not happy with the contact arrangements with their family. When asked for more detail, they said that would like more contact with those they currently saw, unsupervised contact, or different people.
- When asked about if someone had explained to them what an advocate was, approximately 50% said '*no*', and asked if they would like an advocate one third said '*yes*'. However, it was not asked if they had already had one, as it was not necessarily the same children who said that they did not know what one was.



5.18 The Voice of the Child - MOMO

5.19 To improve the range of options available to children and young people to support and encourage them to share their views the MOMO app was introduced since September 2017.



5.20 MOMO stands for 'Mind Of My Own' and is an app used by children and young people primarily over the age of 10 although it is available to all ages. The MOMO app gives children and young people an instant and convenient way to express their views, wishes and feelings, and Social Workers a smart way to record these as it is downloaded onto children and young people's mobiles, tablets, or computers and is an interactive and engaging process for them to use as and when they want to. A young person can sign up to MOMO on their own and are encouraged to use it to obtain their views about anything they choose, however the focus is about their life, the work of children's service and the decisions made about them. The app enables children and young people to share their wishes and feelings with their worker and this feedback is attached to the case records.

5.21 This app is a great tool used for all children and young people, including those who are Looked After and is an alternative consultation form for Looked After Reviews. The aim is to replace the use of the current paper system and use of the consultation booklet so that the majority, if not all future consultations are completed electronically, which will aid analysis and recording onto the child's file for future reference.

5.22 Since the introduction of the MOMO app, the feedback has been used to contribute to the CBSCB online Voice of the Child survey to underpin effective safeguarding arrangements for children and young people, including those whom are looked after. The survey aims to ensure that children and young people are consulted about the delivery of services they access, and their views are heard. The information gathered from the survey is fed back to the CBSCB and used to improve services for children, young people and their families.

5.23 The survey is on our CBSCB website and is accessed via:

<http://www.centralbedfordshirelscb.org.uk/lscb-website/children-and-young-people/your-views>

5.24 Since the introduction, 162 young people have contributed to this survey via the MOMO app of which 91 (56%) are girls and 71 (44%) are boys. Although the MOMO app is targeted to be used for children and young people aged 10 years plus, the children using it record themselves as between 5-15 years of age which may be possible as they are supported to complete it by their carer, Social Worker, or IRO. When reviewed via Mosaic, the Children's Services record indicates that none of the young people who used MOMO are identified as having a disability.

	September – December 2017	January – March 2018	Total
Boys	43	28	71
Girls	55	36	91
Total	98	64	162

- 5.25 Prior to attending a meeting, visit or contact with their worker whom may be an IRO the young person is asked '*how did you feel before coming today?*' They may choose more than one answer from the selection as below or choose their own of which 30 young people said 'okay', 5 said 'hopeful', 3 said 'pleased' and 1 'relieved'. No young people said that they would like the meeting, visit or contact to be at a different time, place or to see someone else.

This survey is being developed to capture the voice of the young people once they have attended the meeting and this will provide valuable feedback to identify how the service may be improved.

How did you feel before coming today?	September – December 2017	January – March 2018	Total
Happy	99	45	144
Excited	12	12	24
Enthusiastic	4	2	6
Calm	46	21	67
Unsure	40	3	43
Angry	8	5	13
Confused	20	2	22
Worried	8	5	13
Sad	4	0	4
Nervous	3	3	6

- 5.26 As part of the CBSCB survey, young people are asked '*is there anything else that you wish to say?*' It is interesting to note that 75 of the 162 have provided an additional comment from the MOMO selection, of which 13% have said that they '*would like to be listened to more*', 2% have said '*to be treated differently*'.

Is there anything else?	September – December 2017	January – March 2018	Total
Said they would like to be listened more	8	14	22
Nothing	0	22	22
More Support	0	12	12
To be treated differently	3	1	4
I don't know	15	0	15
Total	26	49	75

- 5.28 The information obtained as part of the consultation process via the consultation booklets and, or MOMO app completed by the children and young people is shared with the IRO prior to their Review and underpins the discussion and decision making about their current care arrangements and if changes are needed to reflect their views.

5.28 Feedback from Young People about their IRO

5.29 Young people said they have a good relationship with their IRO and that their IRO know them well and made comments like:

'The only one that has been there from the start'

'It was good to have you in my corner'

6.0 Parental Participation

- 6.1 The IRO Handbook advises that the IRO should seek the views of birth parents and any other adults with parental responsibility and other significant persons in the child's life, for example extended family members.
- 6.2 Parent's active participation is achieved through attendance, completion of a consultation booklet, representation via an advocate or Social Worker, in writing or consultation by phone or in person with the IRO separately from the review meeting. Consultation booklets are sent out by CRS to all parents whose whereabouts are known unless the IRO advises there are inappropriate circumstances.
- 6.3 Overall 69% (606/875) of reviews record parental participation, reflecting one or both parents either attending 33% (292/875) or contributing to the review process. There remains a far greater participation by mothers than fathers. Mothers' views were obtained for 65% (571/875) of reviews, fathers for 45% (391/875). For those cases where parental views are not obtained the reason is recorded. In a small percentage 4% (6/147) of cases both parents have died.
- 6.4 There are some parents whose whereabouts are unknown 9% (77/875) of mothers, and 21% (183/875) of fathers an improvement of 2% and 1% respectively from the previous year. In some cases, parents are invited but do not attend 15% (133/875) mothers, 11% fathers (100/875). If they do not choose to attend, or to complete the consultation leaflet they can still contribute their views if they wish to do so, but a proportion do not choose to take up the opportunity.

7.0 Service User Feedback

- 7.1 IROs will respond promptly and informally to questions and queries arising from young people, their parents and carers. This process of engagement results in every concern raised being resolved through informal discussion and exploration of the matter. However, during this period one formal complaint was received from a foster carer on behalf of the young person due to the timeliness of the distribution of their Review minutes and steps have been taken to reduce this reoccurring.

Positive feedback is often verbal and not routinely captured, however this is an example:

PCW, aged 17 has been Looked After since aged 11.

His Social Worker has changed in the last 12 months, however the IRO has remained the same for over 6 years and has a long-term relationship with P and his parents. His placement became fragile and he was also school refusing and consequently due to the changes of Social Worker and his difficulties the IRO reviewed P every 3 months to offer support and oversight.

P's mother refused to speak to the Social Worker, however it was agreed that she would speak to the IRO every 3 months for an update and the IRO visits P every 2-3 months for a coffee and they communicate by text in between.

P states the IRO is 'the only one who has been there since the start'.

8.0 The Conduct of the Organisation in Relation to the Review and IRO impact

- 8.1 Conference and Review Service (CRS) sit within Professional Standards 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.
- 8.2 The IRO completes two monitoring forms after each LAC Review. Following development with the Mosaic team and IROs these forms are now part of the Mosaic process. One records information about the arrangements, who has been consulted, participation by parents and children, completion of required documentation, Health Assessment, Personal Education Plan and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. An additional form provides qualitative feedback in respect of care planning, children's participation, and appropriate involvement with family and partnership working with other agencies.
- 8.3 The relevant Team Manager receives both feedback forms. Feedback on practice includes good practice as well as any areas of concern. The qualitative feedback is rated focusing on the care the child has received and challenging any concerns in respect of the social work practice or wider service provision. The Team Manager will share with the Social Worker in supervision and if any identified actions are needed and ensure these are completed.
- 8.4 Conference and Review hold bi-monthly Quality Assurance Meetings with each of the fieldwork teams. A Fostering Manager also attends which helps to pick up any concerns within placement. A summary report is provided by CRS which is circulated to the relevant Heads of Service. This process ensures that feedback on practice is shared with the individual Social Worker and Team Manager and an overview is given to Heads of Service.

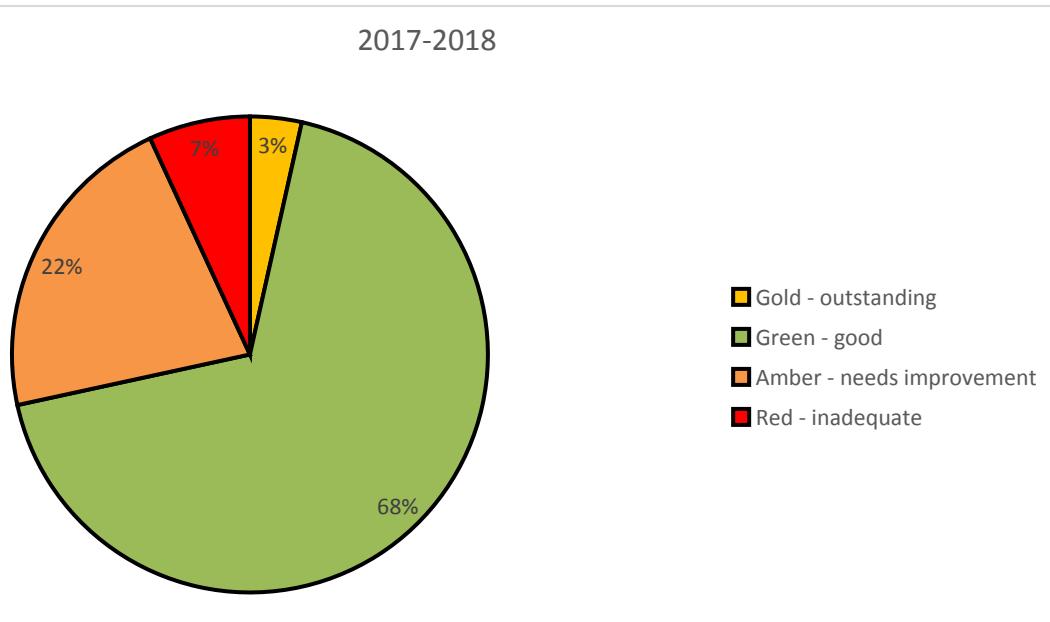
NK – aged 14, had been accommodated due to long term neglect.

N informed the IRO at the pre-LAC review meeting that she was unhappy in her placement; that she had been to school with holes in her shoes and the carers were not allowing her to have hot school meals.

The IRO spoke immediately with the child's SW and the foster carers SW and requested a move.

This was supported by both Social Worker's and N was moved within 10 days to what is now her long-term placement where she is thriving.

- 8.5 Examples of good practice are highlighted in the Quality Assurance Meetings and recorded in the minutes.
- 8.6 For the period of 2017, a total of 14 meetings took place in the key areas of Children's Services who are allocated Looked After Children and discussed 352 children and a total of 792 Looked After Children reviews. The rating awarded in relation to the quality of social work practice, wider service provision and the outcomes for the young person was reviewed, which was as shown below:



- 8.7 The grading of practice is consistently high as shown above. Of the 792 quality monitoring forms completed, 28 (3%) have been graded as gold, that is outstanding practice, 544 (68%) children as green, that is good practice 172 (22%) as amber and 55 (7%) as red.

- 8.8 The identified themes in relation to areas of improvement have been addressed in a variety of ways both operationally and strategically as required. For example, in response to changing the child's care plan the IRO's completed presentations at operational team meetings and actioned the strategic changes required at a whole Service level. The implementation and impact on practice relating to these identified themes will be subject to further review to measure the impact of this learning and the outcomes to children and young people.

ED - a young person aged 17, was in care subject to section 20 and although soon to be 18 and no longer be in care, will continue to have the support of the Local Authority as a care leaver until she is 21 years old. The IRO assessed the practice as a 'red' raised concerns that the young person was unsafe in her current placement and there was no evidence of the placement preparing her for independence and highlighted these concerns at an operational and strategic level, that is the social worker, team manager, and the commissioning team. As a result, ED moved placement and described the situation as 'much better'. The placement was described as taking a proactive approach to meeting her needs and work regarding her independent living skills work commenced.

The subsequent review and practice was rated as 'green'.

9.0 Conduct of the Organisation in Relation to the Case

Procedures for Resolution of Concerns

- 9.1 CRS focuses on immediate problem solving with Social Workers and Team Managers whenever possible and will always begin to address issues in a constructive co-operative and child-centred manner. CRS has a Quality Assurance Process in place as described above through which most concerns will continue to be raised and resolved.
- 9.2 However the IRO Handbook strengthens the role of the IRO and requires the Authority to have a formal Disputes Resolution Policy.
- 9.3 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, that is a referral to CAFCASS which will usually occur when a dispute raised through this process has not been resolved in a timely way. The IRO Service has implemented the CAFCASS and Independent Reviewing Officer Good Practice Protocol for Public Law Work. This has helped to ensure cases in proceedings are subject to robust analysis and challenge about matters of critical importance to the child's safety, wellbeing and permanency needs. An IRO comment on final care plans is now fully embedded and IROs have contributed to timely care planning and case progression by appropriate challenge to any identified delay.
- 9.4 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.

- 9.5 Most concerns will be raised with the Team Manager through the existing Quality Assurance Process. The rating system in place ensures that more urgent or serious matters are highlighted. Cases rated amber or red are tracked through the Quality Assurance Meetings until resolved or escalated into formal dispute, if appropriate, again until resolved.
- 9.6 A failure to respond or resolve a concern through the Quality Assurance Process will lead to a formal dispute being raised in accordance with the Dispute Resolution Procedure.
- 9.7 As a result of the Ofsted inspection, 2017 and comments specifically referring to the IRO role and oversight has resulted in a review of the Dispute Resolution Procedure which has resulted in the number of escalations increasing which is attributed to the process being 'refreshed' and a robust threshold of application.
- 9.8 The number of escalations has increased this year to 18 for Looked After Children from 9 the previous year.
- 9.9 Areas of concern that have been identified via the Dispute Resolution process have included the following issues:
- Delay in achieving permanency for the child, and, or action to match sibling group to placement.
 - LAC planning not completed in timescale.
 - Placement choice.
 - Allocation of Independent Visitor.
 - Plans to secure independent living arrangements.
- 9.10 Most escalations have been resolved by the Team Manager, however if a resolution is not achieved at this stage it is escalated to the Head of Corporate Parenting who has chaired complex case discussions enabling a thorough exploration of the concerns and options and contributing positively to an agreed resolution.

C – aged 17, residing in a semi-independent provision contacted the IRO as deeply unhappy and worried about her future plans and being made homeless when she turned 18. C was informed that she would have to leave and move to temporary accommodation while her housing application is processed.

This escalation resulted in a meeting being convened with the IRO, Team Manager and Social worker and it was agreed that her placement would be extended whilst her housing was secured. Team Manager pursued communication with Housing Provider. Audit Manager undertook an audit on the case.

- 9.11 A small number of disputes have been escalated to Head of Service, however escalation to the Assistant Director, independent Legal Advice, or a referral to CAFCASS has not been required.
- 9.12 One IRO implemented another Local Authority's Dispute Resolution Procedure to highlight a concern regarding their practice and seek a resolution:

'A 10-year-old young person subject to an Adoption Order resided in Central Bedfordshire area as she was placed twice with adopters by a neighbouring Local Authority. However, it is regrettable that on both occasions the adoptive placements broke down and consequently she became a Looked After Child in Central Bedfordshire because of the location of her former adoptive home and is now being supported by Central Bedfordshire Children's Services in a long-term foster placement which is planned to be her permanent home. The young person is settled and happy there but understandable was devastated by the break-down of her adoptions.'

The IRO was keen that the original Local Authority complete a review of the two adoption breakdowns in order to avoid similar problems and to assist with future planning for this young person. The IRO requested this request for a meeting as part of the LAC review process, however as this did not proceed escalated this outstanding issue and implemented the other Local Authority's Dispute Resolution Procedures.

Subsequently a review meeting to reflect on the potential causes for the adoption breakdowns was held, which has helped to inform future planning with young person, as well as providing her former adopters with an opportunity to share their experiences'.

- 9.13 Exploratory discussions have been held with partner agencies to extend the use of the Dispute Resolution Procedure as a feedback tool not just in relation to the practice of Children's Services but incorporate partner agencies.

R, aged 14 came into care in March 2016 following concerns regarding physical abuse by mother.

R and his mother were keen to engage in therapy as they both recognised that there are some difficult issues in their relationship which they need support with resolving. Discussion with the IRO led to a recommendation to explore a referral to the local therapeutic provision however the response was that they could not provide a service as they do not undertake direct work with birth families for Looked After Children. The team convened a complex case discussion and agreed that the NICE guidelines would be reviewed, and the decision challenged, however if they did not accept the referral the social worker had identified an alternative provider and the LA would pursue family therapy that would be funded privately.

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

- 10.1 A plan is progressing to ensure that CRS are appropriately resourced to deliver an effective IRO Service. Throughout the year there have been pressure points when the numbers of children requiring a service, primarily the children subject of a Child

Protection Plan has risen and subsequently the numbers of conferences required as the IRO has a dual role. This is closely monitored and on occasions the IROs caseloads have exceeded the national guidance, however additional funding has been granted to recruit an additional IRO post for a fixed period of 2 years to address this issue.

- 10.2 There have been a number of changes within the Corporate Parenting Service, however plans are in place to address this and ensure that a full complement of permanent employees are in post to ensure continuity of care for children and young people.
- 10.3 A key focus of issues that affect young people is placement choice, placement stability, and achieving permanence for all Looked After Children. Plans are progressing to ensure that these actions are met and exceeded.

11.0 Updates regarding the progress of action plans including the Ofsted Action Plan 2017

- 11.1 The IRO Service has worked closely with the Corporate Parenting Teams in respect of achieving permanence for all children and young people. Various strategies have been implemented to address this, including:

Permanency Tracking Meetings introduced in November 2017, take place as a fortnightly case review meeting coordinated by the Practice Manager of CRS and attended by all Practice Managers at which cases are presented by the allocated Social Worker and Team Manager to review the permanence plan for each child.

- 11.2 Permanency Tracking Meetings have identified and addressed issues which may have previously caused undue delay and has resulted in the development of a strategic action plan to 'achieve permanence for all' (dated July 2017) which is in the process of being implemented. However, as a basis the following has been achieved:

- The issue and need for permanency / stability is now clearly focussed and timescales to achieve this are being challenged and reduced as part of the Permanency Tracking meeting.
- The Permanency Tracking process includes the start date of the when the child or young person entered care to ensure that permanency plans are highlighted with an aim to be secured at the second review for each child.
- The records of the Permanency Tracking Meetings are now recorded onto each child's file and the Permanency Panel Tracking database, which is in the process of being enhanced to support the identification of emerging key themes.
- The Performance Tracking database now incorporates children subject to PLO (Public Law Outline) which were previously held on a separate database.

A young person, C had been in an Independent Foster Agency placement for 3 years and the IRO assessed that funding should be secured to enable this placement to be secured as his long term.

A complex case discussion was held and as a consequence it was agreed that this should be progressed. This has now been achieved and C is described as having made great progress in terms of his social skills, being far more confident and contained.

- 11.2 The IRO Service is represented at a weekly multi-agency meeting that reviews all children and young people requiring additional services and resources. This meeting provides senior management oversight in relation to practice, decision making and consistency that resources are evenly and fairly provided. The IRO representation provides independent input and robust challenge.
- 11.3 CRS are embedding the use of disruption meetings chaired by an IRO, for occasions when long term placements breakdown to now include young people whom are in a placement for 12 months or more.
- 11.4 The CRS leads a bi-monthly Quality Assurance Meeting with the Corporate Parenting Team. The practice, progress and outcomes of individual and all children and young people is reviewed and identified areas of development, learning and improvement are identified for the organisation and actioned as required. It has been agreed that this will form part of a quarterly report to be presented to Senior Managers
- 11.5 IROs continue to undertake additional learning and development. One member of the team attended a Post Qualifying course at the University of Bedfordshire and all IROs regularly access and attend formal and informal opportunities for learning to address and anticipate the changing profile of our Looked After Children population and their needs.

KB - A young person aged 15 arrived from Iraq alone and was immediately placed into a Pakistani Muslim household in a neighbouring authority under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. The IRO completed an initial visit prior the LACR and the young person asked to be moved to an "English foster placement". Through the use of the interpreter, he was very adamant, and said that he did not want to be with an Asian Muslim family, but he wanted to be in an English-speaking home, with English people. This created a dilemma for the professionals involved as they considered that his needs would be better met in the multi-racial community where he was placed as there are many Muslim families and some Iraqi young people. However, listening to him and hearing his voice the IRO was aware of an available placement in a Bedfordshire village whose last young person who was an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker had successfully been reunited with his father. The foster carers work with this previous young man had been outstanding as she learnt to cook food of his Country of origin, took him to the local Mosque, met the Iman and welcomed his friends to her home to socialise.

The IRO and the SW spoke to this foster carer and within 5 days moved, he moved to his new foster placement where he has been for the last 12 months and is flourishing. At each meeting he thanks the IRO for listening to his wishes as he aspires to be a doctor or a politician. The carer identified an English summer school which both the virtual school and Corporate Parenting funded and within 3 months the young man was able to speak English fluently.

- 11.6 The IRO Service has maintained, strengthened and developed partnership working with colleagues in CBC and in partner organisations. Managers in other service areas have been invited to our team meetings to inform and develop practice and improvements. CRS works closely with the Virtual School and IROs ensure oversight of Personal

Education Plans and the use of the Pupil Premium and escalate any concerns. A representative from CRS attends the monthly legal issues meeting.

- 11.7 A permanent Foster Care Review Officer has been in post since early 2016 and this has proved to be an asset within the organisation. The Review Officer periodically attends CRS team meetings, and this has provided a closer working relationship with all IRO's and the joint views regarding quality of placements. IROs routinely provide the Review Officer a copy of the monitoring form, which includes their views on the quality of care provided by the CBC foster carer for the child and young person reviewed. Plans are in place to enhance the role of the Foster Care Review Officer and develop a stronger quality assurance monitoring role based upon the current model used for Looked After Children reviews.
- 11.8 Continued improvements have been made to the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Feedback loop with the commissioning team

R – aged 14 is in care (s31) and placed with foster carers.

At a LAC review in 2017, R was to be referred for an independent visitor, however at the following LAC Review an Independent Visitor had not been appointed and R highlighted in his consultation booklet that he still wanted one.

The IRO escalated this to the Team Manager and the Commissioning Team. As a result, the provider acknowledged the delay in appointing an Independent Visitor due service delivery and the availability of a suitable ‘match’, which has been addressed through the commissioning arrangements.

- 11.9 The revised monitoring form includes feedback on Commissioned Services, including placements, The Children's Society, CAMHS provision and other specialist services.
- 11.10 Both the previous Commissioning Manager and the Quality Assurance Manager from Commissioning continue to attend CRS Team Meetings regularly to ensure ongoing communication to improve services and outcomes for children. IROs provide commissioning a copy of the monitoring form, including comment on the services provided and the Quality Assurance Officer provides a quality assurance report to the IRO for each placement caring for a young person. The QA manager always seeks feedback from the IRO on placements which are included in the Commissioning QA report and any concerns raised are followed up.
- 11.11 A close working relationship between the IRO's and the QA manager has assisted in 'closing the loop' on issues in residential / 16+ placements and enabling the QA Manager to challenge and monitor providers to a high standard.
- 11.12 The IRO Service has developed practice in respect of monitoring and tracking between reviews. This is needs based rather than timetabled so the level of oversight and progress chasing will be dependent on the child's circumstances. All IRO activity in respect of the child is recorded on the child's record and the use of mobile technology is available to all IRO's and actively used. The use of mobile technology provides a more accessible, alternative form of communication for young people with the use of Skype and Facetime and provides a different medium to obtain their wishes and views via the different applications that are available.

11.13 The Participation Officer is part of the Professional Standards Service and has attended IRO team meetings to ensure that we continually review the knowledge and experiences of young people within care. An IRO is a member of the Corporate Parenting Board to offer an independent overview of the needs of young people whom are looked after.

12.0 Annual Work Programme for Next Year – detailed action plan in appendix

- Respond to recent and any emerging National Guidance.
- Achieve ‘permanence for all’ Looked After Children
- Strengthen the Voice of the Child within the Looked After Children process.
- Review the Looked After Child Review format and implement changes to ensure that they are child focused and engage with young people in a meaningful way.
- Continue to develop the work with the CICC.
- IROs to provide a robust and effective case review.
- Ensure appropriate and proportionate case overview by IROs to include external agencies provision of service.
- Implement and appropriate and proportionate case overview and effective challenge to improve practice of Fostering Reviews.

Sharon Keenan
Practice Manager
Conference and Review Service