

## Annual Report of Croydon IRO Service 2018-2019

Reporting Period	1 <sup>st</sup> April 2018 – 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2019
Report of	INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE – Quality Assurance Team
Report to	Corporate Parenting Board
Report Originators	Adam Fearon-Stanley
Date of Report	21 <sup>st</sup> June 2019

## ***The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Looked after Children.***

This report is an analysis of the activity of the IRO and Independent visitor services and their effectiveness and impact on children's and young people's safety and care in Croydon.

It provides qualitative and quantitative data on the service for 2018/19 as required by statutory guidance.

### **1. Introduction**

This annual report covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 and has been produced under the requirements of the IRO handbook 2010 for scrutiny by the members of the corporate parenting board.

The guidance states that:

*This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed. It should make reference to:*

- *procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and it should include an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;*
- *the development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make-up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;*
- *extent of participation of children and their parents;*
- *the number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;*
- *outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews; and*
- *whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children.*

The Independent Reviewing Service has a key role in assuring the quality of a Local Authority's care planning for looked after children and improving the overall quality of services offered.

### **2. Legal & Statutory Context of the IRO role**

The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

The Independent Reviewing service operates within the framework of the IRO Handbook. This is statutory guidance issued to local authorities in 2010. The

IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement and quality assurance of the Care Planning for Looked after Children and in challenging any drift and delay.

IRO's have a responsibility to ensure that plans are timely, effective and achieve good outcomes for children and young people. They have a responsibility to promote best practice and high professional standards across the Children's Social Work Service.

IROs make an important contribution to the consistency of practice from all those who have a corporate responsibility for looked after children. They have a duty to prevent drift and delay in care planning and ensure that the local authority's efforts are focused on meeting the needs of children and achieving the best possible outcomes. IROs monitor the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent, in ensuring that appropriate actions are taken to meet the child's assessed needs, and that the Local Authority is operating in line with care planning regulations.

### 3. Profile of Croydon IRO Service

The Independent Reviewing Service is sited within the Quality Assurance Service in Croydon and benefits from close links with the Child Protection Conference Chairs and the Local Authority Designated Officer. In October 2018 three administrative posts were added to Quality Assurance to support the central organisation of Looked After Children Reviews

Adam Fearon-Stanley now leads the service, having acted up in the position from February 2018 before being appointed on a permanent basis in March 2019. The Local Authority Designated Officer assists with supervision and appraisal of five of the IRO staff.

At the time of writing this report the IRO Service has 13 full time equivalent posts. There are 15 IRO's in place. 10 are permanent full time IRO's. There are 2 permanent part time IRO's. 3 agency IRO are in post, one of whom has been with the IRO Service for over a year. Agency IRO provided cover for permanent positions whilst recruiting and inducting new IRO's, and have contributed to managing sickness in the service. The service has also been joined by 3 business support staff who support the central organisation of Looked After Children Reviews.

During the period 2018 – 2019 three IRO's left the Local Authority, and a fourth IRO has acted up in a different position within the Quality Assurance service. There has been significant sickness affecting three members of staff, which has led to a reduction of caseloads for those affected. Long term absences from work have been mitigated by the addition of agency IROs to the staff group and Quality Assurance Managers assisting with the chairing of Looked After Reviews. There has been an intensive recruitment drive which at the time of writing has culminated in 3 IROs being appointed on a permanent basis, 2 of whom have begun work while the third progresses through employment checks. One post remains vacant.

IRO's who have remained in post during this period have strong and enduring relationships with the children and young people they review. The same IRO will tend to review all the children in a sibling group, which maintains continuity for children and parents alike. Many children have had the same IRO for a number of years. Maintaining this ongoing consistent relationship is seen as very important by children and IROs alike. Many IRO's elect to retain allocation of children whom they review on duty, due to staff sickness or turnover, if they have capacity to do so.

The team is predominantly female- of the 15 staff in post, 9 are women of African or African Caribbean ethnic origin and 2 women of white British ethnic origin. We have one woman of Asian ethnic origin. We have 4 male IROs 3 of white British ethnic origin and the 4<sup>th</sup> who is Black American.

Below is a table showing the diversity of the ethnic backgrounds of the children looked after by the local authority.

<b>Children looked after as at 31st march 2019</b>	<b>2018-2019</b>
<b>Yes</b>	
A1 - White British	178
A2 - White Irish	7
A3 - Any other White background	119
A4 - Traveller of Irish Heritage	<5
A5 - Gypsy / Roma	<5
B1 - White and Black Caribbean	39
B2 - White and Black African	10
B3 - White and Asian	15
B4 - Any other mixed background	48
C1 - Indian	5
C2 - Pakistani	9
C3 - Bangladeshi	<5
C4 - Any other Asian background	129
D1 - Caribbean	76
D2 - African	124
D3 - Any other Black background	38
E1 - Chinese	5
E2 - Any other ethnic group	18
E4 - Information not yet obtained	<5
<b>Children who had left our care in 2018 - 2019</b>	
A1 - White British	64
A2 - White Irish	<5
A3 - Any other White background	97
B1 - White and Black Caribbean	14
B2 - White and Black African	9
B3 - White and Asian	6
B4 - Any other mixed background	26
C1 - Indian	<5
C2 - Pakistani	<5
C3 - Bangladeshi	<5

C4 - Any other Asian background	75
D1 - Caribbean	27
D2 - African	75
D3 - Any other Black background	18
E2 - Any other ethnic group	21
E3 - Refused	<5
E4 - Information not yet obtained	7
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1273</b>

The make-up of our IRO Service does not reflect the gender make-up of the children looked after by Croydon – there are a higher number of males than females in our care whilst the composition of our IRO Service is the reverse with more females.

#### 2018-2019 Gender of Children Looked After

<b>2018-2019 LAC Children Looked After at 31st march 2019</b>			
	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Yes	287	537	824
No	139	310	449
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>847</b>	<b>1273</b>

All IROs have at least five years post-qualifying experience as a social worker and are registered as social workers with the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC). Several of our IRO's have previously held managerial roles in other service areas. All newly appointed IRO's in the period 2018 - 2019 have previously held management positions or have experience of supervising social work staff, as this has now been made a requirement in the job specification.

IROs and managers can access a diverse range of training appropriate to their development needs and the specific areas of knowledge required by the needs of the young people on their caseloads. Some of this training is bespoke and arranged by the service to meet the specific requirements of IROs, such as the IRO CAFCASS Conference. Other training is more generic and accessed by a wide range of social work staff. IRO's manage their own practice group sessions where IRO prepare and present to the group about a relevant topic. One of the IRO's takes responsibility for maintaining a team library for the service sharing articles and publications relevant to the role and alerting colleagues to new additions.

IROs were observed chairing reviews by their managers this year, and it has been agreed that this needs to increase in order to ensure consistency of practice. In response to this, an IRO stock take is underway which will be outlined in later sections of this report.

The service is represented on the Adoption panel and Fostering panel for the authority. IROs regularly take part in selection panels for the Independent Visitor Service. Efforts to link IRO's to specific service area's to support communication

between services has been variable, with initial meetings taking place between IRO and Service area's but relationships only being sustained in a few services – Adoption, Virtual School, and Children in Care Service for local children. The IRO Service Manager is part of Care Panel, Permanency Panel and High Cost Panel all of which are opportunities to highlight IRO views to decision makers and conversely for the activity of the IRO's to be understood by colleagues across the services.

The IRO service is represented at the London wide IRO group and has regular feedback from the sessions held.

During 2017 the IRO Manager forged links with the Court Case progressions Manager within Croydon and the CAFCASS Manager in South London. This has helped to improve links overall for the IROs with Children's Guardians appointed by the Courts for children in proceedings. The CAFCASS link Guardian for Croydon has attended 2 team meetings during 2018 - 2019. The IRO Service Manager is also part of the quarterly meetings between the local authority and CAFCASS which began in early 2019.

The Croydon IRO service hosted a conference of IROs and Children's Guardians from across South London in June 2018. This was a valuable training opportunity and networking event for IRO's and Guardians across the region. Judge Probyn gave a keynote speech. This was a well-attended meeting and further strengthened the links between IROs and Children's Guardians which will benefit children in proceedings. The Croydon IRO service is again hosting the same conference in September 2019 to continue to build the links between IRO and Guardian's.

#### 4. Our context

The OFSTED inspection in 2017 identified that the service provided to children and young people in Croydon was inadequate. The Inspectors did note that there were 'unique' factors in Croydon around unaccompanied asylum seeking children. They also recognised that we were improving standards but the pace of change wasn't quick enough.

The OFSTED inspection found there was insufficient evidence of IRO challenge on children's files particularly where plans were found to be subject to unnecessary drift and delay.

At Ofsted's monitoring visit in October 2018 it was noted that IRO challenge was beginning to be more effective but had not had sufficient impact on outcomes for children in the cases seen by Inspectors. It was recognised that there had been 27 examples of escalation including to CAFCASS and Director level. It was encouraging that Ofsted Inspectors had recognised an increase in IRO challenge to colleagues, but it was recognised that there was still much to be achieved.

A new Head of Service, Shaun Hanks began in post after the October monitoring visit. In January 2019 a new Director, Nick Pendry, began. Both bring a focus on systemic based social work practice and outcomes for children in relation to their health, education and social relationships. A restorative practice approach is being embedded within the Quality Assurance Service to ensure that challenge is effective and supports outcomes for children.

There has been an expansion of staff and administrative support in social work teams which has been positive in relation to improving practice, but placed increasing pressure on office space. There has been an increase in the number of requests to work from home, which impacts upon the IRO presence within the office. At the time of writing a new desk allocation plan across the division is being designed.

Update on Annual work programme for April 2018 – March 2019 (detailed in the previous Annual Review)

***Theme One: Achieve good outcome for looked after children and young people***

***Service Outcome: The IRO role in improving the outcomes for children and young people is evident and valued by managers and workers across the service***

- ***Launch a system of mid-way reviews and checks. Ensure IROs are aware of changes in cases and have a clear mandate to check and chase progress on actions they have outlined as being needed as part of Care Planning for Looked After Children.***

Midway Reviews were implemented in August 2018. As of the 27<sup>th</sup> May 2019 278 Midway Reviews had been carried out by IRO's. These can be carried out as a case file audit, and where required progress to face to face meetings if a care plan is not thought to be progressing by the IRO. 60 Midway Reviews have resulted in face to face meetings between IRO and colleagues. Nine led to Looked After reviews being convened earlier to address care planning issues and 13 resulted in escalations where there were concerns regarding drift or delay.

Feedback from social workers and team managers is that the Midway Review is a valued space in which to discuss children's care plans and agree how to progress. Anecdotal feedback from several IRO's suggest that the Midway Reviews may reduce the requirement for escalation as they identify drift and delay prior to the next review. From discussion with IRO's timely recording of Midway Reviews is an area that needs to be improved.

IRO's can also use the Midway Review to record their views as the IRO when attending professional or strategy meetings. Team managers do not often attend Midway Reviews with IRO's and this is also an area that requires further development.

- ***Run a series of sessions with IRO's alongside partners in Camden to further enhance IRO skills in relation to recognising good quality Care Planning activity and challenging colleagues when standards are not met.***

At the time of writing this report there had been a series of sessions carried out alongside our partners in Camden (four in total). These have been fruitful discussions about how to sustain respectful relationships with others whilst holding them to account for standards of practice. Systemic approaches to social work practice have been at the heart of these sessions and this will be built on by the introduction of reflective group supervision for IRO's in the coming period by the new head of systemic practice in Croydon and the supervision offered by quality assurance managers who are receiving systemic supervision training.

- ***Introduce a grading system for care plans in order to identify cases where the quality of Care Planning has not been good enough and also to recognise best practice in Care Planning.***

Formal QA feedback to social work reports was introduced in October 2018. This led to an increase in reports being completed for Looked After Children Reviews and offered an opportunity for IRO's to comment on the quality of reports provided to reviews. Since January 2019 responsibility for quality assuring social work reports is now held with Team Managers and routine formal QA feedback on social work reports has since ended.

- ***Monitor themes of the issues escalated by IROs to aid service planning.***

The IRO Service Manager has oversight of all issues escalated to senior leadership by IROs, which will be discussed in greater detail in later sections of the IRO Report.

- ***Learn from information provided by complaints, Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service about key issues affecting the lives of children and young people we look after.***

The bi-monthly Learning Loop meetings established in 2019 are the conduit through which learning from complaints can be relayed. The IV service has relayed the views of some young people that they do not wish to engage in reviews and the service is challenging itself to develop more inclusive and less formal reviews.

- ***Work alongside colleagues in Care Planning and Permanence to introduce methods of gaining feedback from children and young people who are looked after via APP based technology.***

This has been progressed and the council will award a contract for an app to assist children to feedback to Looked After Children Reviews. This APP can also be potentially used for Personal Education Plan Meetings, Child In Need Meetings, Child Protection Conferences and Family Group Conferences. 40



children, both looked after and living with their birth families were part of the commissioning and procurement process and their views have been given precedence in the selection process.

## **THEME TWO: Improve Timeliness of Reviews and Recording**

***Service Outcome: Reviews and the recording around them are a priority for all teams who share responsibility for making them a helpful part of the Care Planning process for children and young people.***

- ***Reduce recording system dependency on sequential activity. Allow Outcomes to be entered without pre meeting reports where these have not been completed.***

Sequential recording of Looked After Children Reviews was adjusted in October 2018, to allow Looked After Children Review minutes to be entered without Pre Meeting reports being available. This had an immediate impact on IRO's capacity to enter Looked After Children Review minutes in a timely way which is reflected in performance data discussed in later sections of this report. Where care plans are in draft this can still prevent IRO's entering their Looked After Children minutes. There is further revision of the recording system proposed which will be discussed in the proposed work programme for April 2019 – March 2020.

- ***Monitor completion of outcomes by IROs and identify early any issues of delay.***

IRO's now receive a weekly report which sets out all of their Looked After Children Reviews, and when they are due to give them an immediate overview of their caseloads and tasks. The IRO Service Manager receives a daily report reporting all Looked After Children Reviews in this same style which allows for immediate identification of late reviews or those Looked After Children Reviews at risk of being out of time scale. This has been invaluable to Quality Assurance Managers in the service in managing caseloads during sickness and absence.

- ***Reduce the administrative load of organisation and management of review activity on Social Workers, IROs and their managers by centralising administration of reviews in Quality Assurance Business Support Team.***

In October 2018 three business support staff were appointed to support the central organisation of Looked After Children Reviews, initially the administrative team focused on 2<sup>nd</sup> reviews onwards and are now expanding to assist with Initial Reviews also. The administrative team also take responsibility for booking rooms at BWH, arranging interpreters to any Looked After Children reviews and sending out Consultation forms and invites. This additional support has decreased the administrative burden on staff across

the services and has helped to increase the attendance of Personal Assistants at reviews as they are now automatically invited.

It is envisaged that administrative team will have a role in supporting the Looked After Children App, and that the central distribution of review minutes will also facilitate guardians receiving review minutes in a timely manner where children are subject to proceedings.

Performance Indicators were recently introduced for the period of June 2019 onwards to help manage the timeliness of invites sent, minutes distributed, and whom is receiving the minutes particularly children, parents and foster carers who do not have access to our recording system. There is an intent to use central administration to support wider participation of health and education agencies. At the time of writing the IRO Service Manager has met with the Virtual School and Looked After Children Health Assessment Team to explore how to highlight children and young people about whom they are particularly worried to the IRO's. It is the aim that this will encourage discussion about how the staff from these services can be part of Looked After Children Reviews depending the child or young person's individual wishes and feelings.

## **5. Quantitative Information about the IRO Service in Croydon**

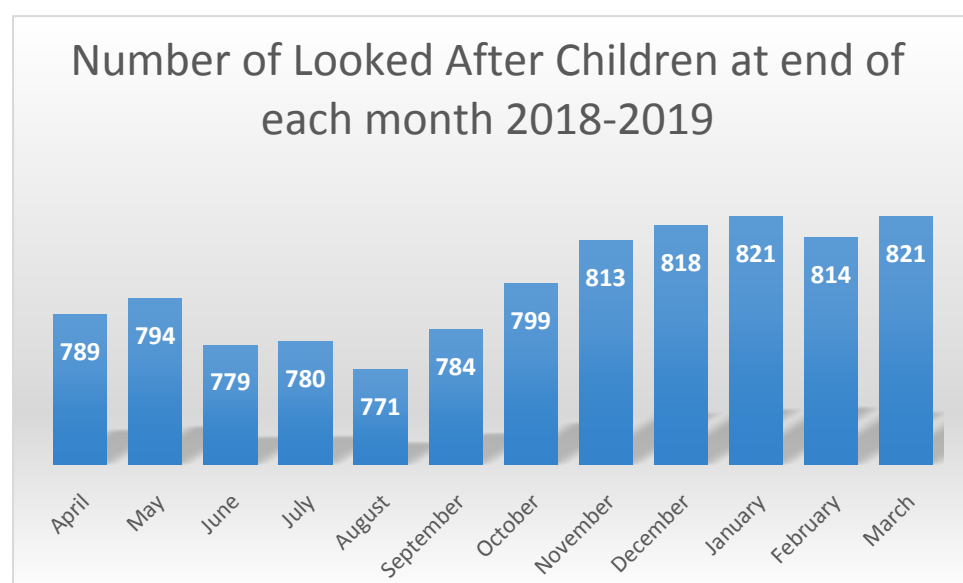
The recommended average caseload as set by the IRO Handbook for an IRO is between 50 and 70 Looked After children. During 2018-19 the average IRO case load was between 60 and 65 cases with caseloads rising to between 66 and 72 by the time of writing this report. Part time IRO's are between 43 and 47 children, which is in excess of the recommended case load pro-rata. The average case load of IRO's is affected by the reduced case load of three IRO's who are held at 50 cases and below, the continuing absence of one IRO on sick leave, and the need to build new IRO's caseloads gradually. Pure numbers of children are not a true indicator of workload for an IRO as this varies a great deal depending on the geographical locations of Looked After Children the number of sibling groups and the complexity of the issues for each child or young person.

As the charts below show the population of Looked After children in Croydon has risen overall throughout the year reaching 821 in April 2019 and currently at 840 at the time that this report was written in June 2019. This is an increase of nearly 1 IRO case load being held across the IRO Service.

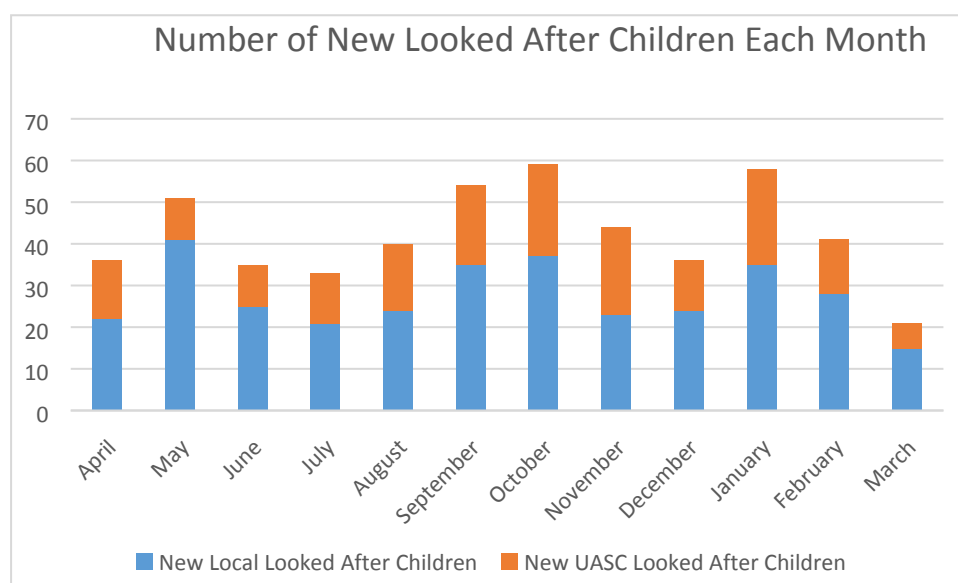
Care planning and reviewing for children originating from other countries brings additional levels of complexity in relation to issues of establishing jurisdiction, use of interpreters and cultural needs, all of which require additional time to ensure effective care planning.

Improvements have been made in respect of Personal Education Plans for children with the percentage of children having a Personal Education Plan review rising from 25% of all children looked after to 52% of all children looked after by the end of the reporting period. This is mirrored by improvement in

health assessments for looked after children. The percentage of all children looked after who had an up to date Looked After Child Health Assessment in the reporting period has risen from 62% to 88%.



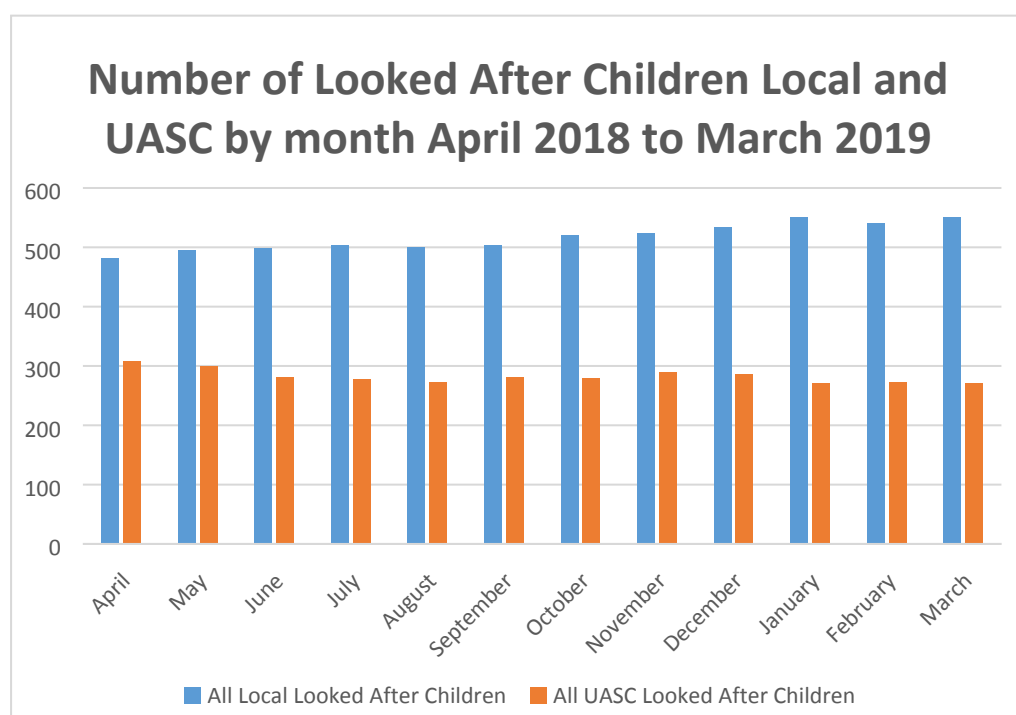
The composition of the Looked After Children population has changed, with an increase in local children (from 482 to 550 by the end of year). This reflected a trend identified in the last IRO Annual Report.



Increases in newly looked after children are a challenge for the whole service including the Independent Reviewing Officers, as initial reviews are required within 28 days of the child or young person becoming Looked After. Overall timeliness for reviews was at 89% during 2018-2019.

Historically the 28 day target can prove challenging when Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children have been placed at a distance from Croydon through the National Transfer Scheme. During 2018/19 however the National Transfer Scheme only transferred 1 child of the 94 children referred to another Local Authority.

The increase in children becoming looked after that are local children correlates to an increase in family court proceedings over the year. This brings an additional layer of scrutiny to care planning for these children and many IRO's choose to offset this by convening Looked After Children Reviews on a more frequent basis.



This chart shows that although the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children being cared for in Croydon fell at the beginning of the reporting period it has remained at between 270 and 280 in total and the total looked after population increased during the year.

As at the end of March 2019, 821 children were looked after by the local authority, 275 of which were unaccompanied asylum seeking children. This equates to 87 children looked after per 10'000 children, or 58 children looked after per 10'000 children is you exclude unaccompanied asylum seeking children. This means that the Local Authority is closer to the National Average of 60 children looked after per 10'000 children and significantly higher than the average number of children looked after by neighbouring London Boroughs of 40 per 10,000 (as of yearend of 2018)

Of the children looked after at the end of 2018 – 2019 406 children were looked after under S20 agreements, of which 275 children were unaccompanied asylum

seeking children. 129 children were subject to Interim Care Orders and subject to Family Court proceedings. 268 children were subject to full Care Orders and remained in the care of the Local Authority. 32 children were subject to Placement Orders with the plan to seek Adoptive Carers for them.

### Children and Young People ceasing to be Looked After:

<b>Table 4. Nos. of children leaving care with reasons</b>		
	<b>9</b>	
	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>% of all leaving care</b>
In care on remand – came to an end	8	1.68%
Adopted - application unopposed	14	2.94%
Adopted- consent dispensed with	5	1.05%
Age assessment determined UASC to be aged 18 or over	5	1.05%
Care taken over by another LA in the UK	57	12%
Sentenced to Custody	13	2.74%
Child died, subject to Serious Case Review	2	0.42%
Moved into independent living arrangement and no longer looked after : accommodation providing no formalised advice/support arrangements (e.g. B&B, bedsit, own flat, living with friends)	35	7.36%
Moved into independent living arrangement and no longer looked after : supportive accommodation providing formalised advice/support arrangements (e.g. most hostels, YMCAs, and care leaver projects)	91	19.157%
Returned Home under Child Arrangement Order	10	2.10%
Return home to live with parents, relatives, or other person with parental responsibility as part of the care planning process	74	15.57%
Return home to live with parents, relatives, or other person with parental responsibility which was not part of the care planning process	20	4.2%
Special guardianship order made to carers other than former foster carers	39	8.21%
Special guardianship order made to former foster carers	1	0.2%
Transferred to care of adult social services ( Possibly some Leaving Care Service Users as well as adults with needs related to Physical or Mental Health )	71	14.947%
Children accommodated for 1 night prior to dispersal on Pan London Rota	11	2.31%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>475</b>	<b>100%</b>

There are several notable changes in the reasons that children and young people are ceasing to be Looked After in Croydon which suggest significant shifts in practice. There is a significant increase in Special Guardianship Orders being granted whereby children live with family members, the use of Child Arrangement Orders to regulate children looked after with wider family members,

and children returning home to live with their parent's. These cohorts have almost doubled in percentage since 2017/18. This reflects efforts by the Local Authority to seek permanence for children within their birth families wherever this can be safe and in their best interests. This is supported by the improved Family Group Conference Service which engages children's families in care planning, further investment in Early Help Services including Functional Family Therapy and Edge of Care Services and wider initiatives already detailed.

## **6. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and the National Transfer Scheme**

The National Transfer Scheme was launched in July 2016 to encourage all local authorities to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) so that there is a more even distribution of caring responsibilities across the country. Under the scheme a child arriving in one local authority area, already under strain caring for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, could be transferred to another council with capacity.

Croydon is deemed to be a borough under strain and has been placing children on the transfer scheme according to the transfer protocol. Of the Unaccompanied asylum seeking children who arrived in Croydon in this reporting period 94 were referred to the National Transfer Scheme as suitable for transfer.

Of these 94 children and young people only 1 has transferred to another authority under the scheme. The remaining 93 remain in the care of Croydon. In mid-2018 it was recognised that children and young people were not being accepted by other Local Authorities and therefore placements were found in Croydon or as close to Croydon as possible. This reduced disruption for children when responsibility for their care was not accepted by another Local Authority. It also increased their access to services for unaccompanied asylum seeking children that are clustered in the South East region and Croydon particularly which mirror our historical position as receiving a larger proportion of these children.

The IROs have been active in ensuring that children placed on the National Transfer scheme understand what is happening to them and why. Audits reveal that the IROs were particularly concerned that the children and young people understood that the home they were in was a stable one. They listened carefully to concerns raised about cultural appropriateness of some living arrangements and about the linguistic and cultural connections the young people wanted to make. The review proved a catalyst in a number of cases for Foster Carers and Social workers to make links with sports clubs and religious organisations in order to assist the children and young people to become involved in community life as well as family life in their new home.

## **7. Local Looked After Children Themes and issues.**

The rise in the number of local looked after children is an area of concern. Croydon has in the past had lower numbers of Local Looked After Children than

the national average. To ensure that the right children are becoming looked after new measures have been put in place.

The IRO Manager attends the Care Panel alongside a multi- agency group of professionals to ensure that all avenues to support families to stay together are explored. The number of cases in proceedings has increased throughout the year and this is reflected in the number of children subject to Final Care Orders in the year. Legal Planning Meetings are being convened on a weekly basis and chaired at Director or Head of Service level. These are recorded more consistently and the progress of cases through the Courts is being monitored by the Court Case Progression Manager.

IRO's are checking the legal status of children in reviews and there is evidence that they are liaising more with the children's guardians once cases are in proceedings. Feedback from the IRO link with CAFCASS Guardians at the time of report writing was that contact between IRO and guardians was better overall, with increased communication and IRO's easier to reach, particularly when there was a contentious care planning issue that required discussion. The overall increase in local looked after children subject to a care order during the year was 42 in total.

The recognition of children who are living with extended family members and the regulation of these as connected carers has been a prevalent issue during the year. This has been mirrored by the Local Authority's recognition that this is an area that requires attention and monitoring. IRO's have been active in identifying to line management where they believe a child is Looked After and living with a family member and there has been drift and delay in recognising this.

There has been continuing focus on children who are looked after under S.20 agreements (Section 20, Children Act 1989). The number of children have remained similar over the year beginning at 132 in April 2018 and ending at 125 by March 2019.

The number of cases where children are subject to CP plan prior to becoming looked after has increased and so has the necessity for IRO and CP chairs to liaise with one another about managing the end of CP Plans and the beginning of Looked After Children Review arrangements. Close alliance between the Child Protection Chairs and IROs in cases where children are moving from child protection plans to being looked after has resulted in greater understanding of the issues facing families.

Permanency Planning for all children in Croydon has been a focus since the October 2018 monitoring visit by Ofsted. The IRO Service Manager led a cross service project to focus on children in our care in excess of 1 year to support colleagues to achieve permanency for these children (at that point 128 children). This consisted of face to face work with team managers and social workers in the Corporate Parenting Service to explore permanency planning and agree actions going forward. This led to establishing an ongoing Permanency Panel co-chaired by the IRO Service Manager and the Adoption Service Manager to review this group of children and all children under the age of 5 years old.

IRO's have been provided with the outcome of this learning activity with colleagues and used Looked After Children Reviews to pursue Permanency Planning for these children. IRO's are also able to refer children to the Permanency Panel where they are concerned that there is drift or delay to ensure that senior line managers are sighted on this.

IRO's have identified a range of issues impacting on care planning across the social work services;

- the management of contact between siblings, particularly after final orders are granted, and ensuring that contact with parents continue to be in the best interests of children.
- supporting the stability of placements for children and young people.
- the difficulties faced in identifying placements that can meet children's changing needs over time, and moving children to new carers in a planned way that minimises their distress.
- the lack of consistency in the application of savings policies for looked after children.

#### **8. Timeliness of reviews:**

The Annual 903 return shows that 89% of looked after children received their reviews on time during the year. This figure is not as we wish and reflects the fact that if a single review in the reporting period is out of time then subsequent reviews cannot alter this fact.

Analysis of the data demonstrates the increase of IRO activity over the year, in addition to efforts to embed Midway Reviews, QA Feedback and the monitoring focus on Connected Persons, S20, and Permanency described above.

IRO's have convened Looked After Children Reviews for 1238 children during 2018 - 2019, compared to 1019 in 2017 – 2018.

2600 reviews were held during the year 2018 - 2019. IRO's have chaired 494 additional Looked After Children Reviews in this reporting period compared to 2017 - 2018.

This demonstrates that despite an increased pressure on the IRO Service to meet demand Looked After Children Reviews remained in timescale for the large majority of children. The increase in the number of Looked After Children Reviews reflects a number of intersecting factors;

- An increase in children becoming looked after
- An increase in IRO convening Looked After Children Reviews in cases where children are subject to family proceedings
- IRO's convening Looked After Children Reviews where children's arrangements have changed
- An increase in children being placed for Adoption and hence requiring more frequent Looked After Children Reviews



- An increase in children spending a shorter period in care before returning to their birth families or transferring to adult services
- A significant decrease overall in children being dispersed on the national transfer scheme and hence requiring 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3 Reviews within the calendar year.

A large number of Looked After Children Reviews being out of timescale related to initial reviews (104 over the year). The assistance of new administrative team in the coming year will help to improve this.

Since January 2019 staffing became more unstable in the IRO Service and there has been a higher number of 2<sup>nd</sup> Looked After Children Reviews that have been late. Over the entire reporting period. 182 Looked After Children Reviews were out of timescale, albeit that use of the duty IRO system helped to prevent this being higher.

### **IRO Footprint**

One of the concerns OFSTED had during their Inspection in 2017 was the lack of visibility of the IRO Service within the case records, particularly in relation to how they managed concerns and challenged poor practice.

In 2017 – 2018 one of the primary reasons for this was the absence of Looked After Children Reviews recorded on CRS. At that point recording of reviews was often done 'off system' because pre meeting reports and care plans were not being effectively updated on the system. This practice had become embedded and needed to change.

Through 2018 – 2019 Looked After Review recording was improved by allowing records of reviews to be recorded without a Pre Meeting report being available. This improvement has taken place in the context of a significant increase in the workload of IRO's across the service. There is a need to continue to monitor the timeliness of Looked After Children Review minutes produced by the IRO Service.

Connected to the footprint of the IRO is the use of Midway Reviews which has helped improve identification of when a change of placement review is required. The distribution of decisions within 5 working days of a review has also improved, but remains an area for further development.



## **9. Qualitative**

As we continue to seek to put the child at the heart of our work IRO's contribution to children's lives and their care planning happens in different ways.

below is an example of how one IRO listened and achieved this.

## SOCIAL WORKER FEEDBACK TO IRO SERVICE MANAGER

*Dear colleagues,*

*XXXs IRO made his day even more special by bring Tess the Dog to his review as promised.*

*XXX asked me to remind the IRO to bring Tess and he did not disappoint. We also facilitated an extra contact session with his parent which happened after the meetings.*

*The IRO's gesture made XXXs day even more special and whilst he was able to check on the quality of the service XXX is receiving, his contribution added to a very nice moment where social work happened as it should.*

### **Participation in Reviews**

Participation of children and young people in their reviews is a priority for all IROs. At year end 2018 – 2019 70% of Children and young people over 4 took part in and contributed to their reviews. This does represent a reduction of 11% from the previous year which is of concern.

There is clear evidence in case recording that IROs are meeting and talking to children and young people before their reviews as well as in between meetings.

Below is an example of an IRO ensuring the participation of a child in their meeting;

*Dear XXX*

*Just note to say thank you for your intervention at XXX Review today. Taking the time to talk in depth about what counselling could do for him, and providing him with an opportunity to begin to think about coming to terms with the loss he has felt .....also to stop feeling responsible for XXX was a great step forward*

It is anticipated that the introduction of the Looked After Children App to enable feedback by children to reviews alongside the alteration of the Looked After Children Review format will address this downward trend and evidence the engagement of children in their Reviews more effectively.

Over the period 2018 – 2019 there has been much discussion within the IRO Service about other ways that we can engage with children and place them at the heart of the Looked After Children Review. Two IROs have been piloting writing letters to children to summarise the child's Looked After Review. Other IROs are beginning to move towards this practice. Examples of other boroughs where this practice is embedded has also been shared with IRO Service with colleagues from a neighbouring borough agreeing to meet with our IRO's to discuss this approach. The anticipated revision of the Looked After Children Review formats in the period 2019 - 2020 will be the point where all IRO's are expected to write letters to children summarising their review which not only improves communication and understanding now, but also in the future as adults looking back on their life story.

There is positive feedback from children, parents and professionals about the use of letters to engage children in their reviews. Parents have noted that they have not always been receiving Looked After Children review minutes and are not always informed, foster carers reflect similar concerns. The observations of a supervising social worker for a foster carer as shared with an IRO are below;

*Thank you XXX*

*I can certainly see the benefits for young people to have all this information in a letter, a proper ending for the young person and a reminder of the professionals that were involved in their care.....More user friendly.*

How others experience Looked After Children Reviews and how we can improve participation and experience is an important area to be considered going forward. At the time of writing the IRO stock take is underway. This involves focus groups with IROs, children, parents, foster carers and colleagues to reflect together about Looked After Children Reviews in Croydon and how we can make these better. Questionnaires have also been sent to all participants of reviews in March 2019 seeking their views.

Groups with children are planned in July 2019. The aim is to provide an agreed action plan from the IRO Stocktake for Young Commissioners to inspect the IRO Service against over the remainder of the year.

### **Dispute resolution and escalation**

A significant aspect of IRO's work is focussed on continuing oversight and scrutiny of each child's care plan in between statutory reviews. For Croydon IROs this part of the role is about good quality conversations and appropriate challenge between the IRO and others (e.g. child/ young person/ social worker/ parent/ carer/ school). This activity is difficult to quantify, but is key to ensuring that plans progress appropriately and in a timely way.

It was recognised as part of the OFSTED oversight that not all the IROs were recording their conversations and emails with social workers and managers on the child's record in CRS. This meant there was limited evidence of challenge and any changes as a result of such challenges were harder to track. At Ofsted's Monitoring

visit in October 2018 it was noted that the IRO's had increased their challenge to colleagues but there was still a need to evidence its impact on outcomes for children.

Using the Croydon Escalation and Resolution process (CERP) relaunched in 2017 - 2018 153 CERPs have been raised by IRO's in relation to 105 children. The difference of 48 relates to where the same CERP has been escalated to successive levels of line management to seek resolution. This is a continued increase in the number of CERPs raised in the previous reporting year. Additionally, IRO's have sought informal advice from CAFCASS on 3 occasions making a formal and informal referral to CAFCASS in 2 of these instances during 2018-2019.

Alerts have been raised by the IRO Service for a wide range of reasons including;

- Drift and delay in securing permanency for a child
- The legal status of a placement, as S20, or as requiring regulation as a connected carers arrangement
- Querying the provision of services to a child to support their health, such as counselling or education, such as extra tuition through the Personal Education Plan, or their social relationships, such as contact or life story work
- The level of need for a child
- A child not being visited, or required reports or care plans not being completed for the Looked After Children Review

Other IRO's have suggested that the use of Midway Reviews reduces the need to use CERP, as the use of these resolve issues prior to reviews.

While the number of CERP's has increased overall, the responsiveness of colleagues to this process remains an issue resulting in escalations to Director level. It is in these scenarios that IRO's have sought advice or intervention from CAFCASS

Staff continue to report that they find the CERP adversarial and experience a CERP being raised as a complaint about their practice. This is not a universal position amongst colleagues but typifies many views.

It is evident that the effectiveness of CERP's in resolving issues for children's care planning is governed by various factors;

- How colleagues receive and respond to IRO's challenge and scrutiny.
- The communication by IRO's prior to using an escalation process.
- How the IRO Service raises these alerts when it is necessary.

The relationships between IRO's and colleagues, how colleagues understand the IRO role, is a significant factor in how able we are able to resolve disputes between our services prior to use of the CERP. This will continue to be addressed in the coming year through our Restorative Practice approach, within the IRO stock take, further sessions with Camden including IRO and team managers, and proposed workshops on a monthly basis for staff to learn about the IRO role.

The IRO Service requires senior management to support the scrutiny and challenge that the IRO role has in quality assuring care plans for children and be responsive to

CERPs when they are raised. Both of the interim heads of service for Care Planning and Children in Care view the relationships between the IRO Service and operational social work teams as critical to drive better oversight and scrutiny of social work practice and have assured the IRO Service Manager of this going forward.

The IRO Service Manager and other quality assurance managers encourages IRO's to resolve disputes at a local and informal level including the use of Midway Reviews before using formal mechanisms such as CERP or referral to CAFCASS.

We also seek to support IRO's to progress CERP's. We participate in issue specific meetings alongside the IRO, sight senior management on the ongoing concerns and where they have not been resolved and discuss how else to communicate IRO views with colleagues to achieve best outcomes.

The management of the service by one overall manager with supervisory support from a colleague does mean that themes are picked up in individual supervision across the service. IROs are pro-active in raising issues with each other and escalating these through their manager.

The thematic reporting by quality assurance managers to senior management had been taking place quarterly to the senior leadership team. With the change of director and executive director including several heads of service (including quality assurance) this reporting mechanism needs to be re-established. The Learning Loop meetings referred to previously in this report may be the most appropriate forum for this.

## 10. Rights and Entitlements of Children and Young People

### **Complaints and Compliments:**

The Complaints leaflet revised in 2017 – 2018 for children and young people is distributed by Looked After Children administrators to all children and carers who receive invites to Looked After Children Reviews.

Several IRO's have empowered children to make complaints in this period and reflect that when these are responded to it can give the young person a strong sense of being heard and respected.

We have been encouraging IROs to recognise and promote good practice where they see it. IRO's praise both social workers practice with children and the quality of their written work and presentation. It is recognised by the IRO Service that we need to continue to support our colleagues not only to see where they can improve practice but where they are already doing well.

It is recognised by the IRO Service Manager that there is a requirement to identify themes or patterns emerging from complaints, compliments, advocacy and the

## Independent Visitor Service and the consultation of children, parents, and foster carers to Looked After Children Reviews

### **Independent Visitor Service:**

This internal service was recognised by the OFSTED inspection 2017 as offering a valuable outlet for children and young people in Croydon. There has been substantial investment in this service, there are now 3 full time Independent Visitor Co-Ordinators in post and the service is promoted in Looked After Children Reviews and across the services.

40 new IVs have been recruited and a further 70 IVs trained. As of the end of the reporting year there were 79 children and young people matched with Independent Visitors with 100 children and young people receiving the service through the year.

The team have aspirations to continue to grow their service to children year on year, and currently have the highest number of matched children with IV nationally. The service is a valuable resource for children looked after in Croydon.

### **Advocacy:**

Our Advocacy Service is currently provided by Barnardo's. This service also provides Advocacy to children who are subject to Child Protection Plans. Barnardo's have provided advocacy report to 47 children in the year 2018 – 2019. A broad range of issues have been addressed including;

- Children and young people's wishes and feelings about changes to where they will live-Participation in meetings such as Looked After Children Reviews
- Transition planning for older children and the location of proposed future placements-Savings and entitlements

### **Conclusion:**

There have been significant improvements in the IRO service as evidenced by:

- Maintenance of high levels of reviews being completed on time, with an increasing Looked After population.
- Implementation of Midway Reviews to monitor the progress of care plans
- Commencing writing letters to children as a record of their review
- Improvements in recording and administrative support
- Involvement of children and young people in commissioning the App, interviewing our IRO's and in the IRO Stocktake.

There also remain areas for improvement:

- Improve the involvement of children in their reviews and development of the service
- Evidence impact of IRO involvement and escalation of issues in relation to outcomes for children
- Continue to ensure that IROs practice in a way that provides Challenge and Support

- Better analysis and impact of complaints and compliments

With these areas in mind the action plan for 2019-2020 focusses upon two main themes:

### **Annual Work Plan 2019 – 2020**

#### **Theme 1: To increase participation of children within LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN Reviews and in the strategic delivery of IRO Services**

- Implementation of Looked After Children App across social work services, including health, education and significant partners such as the Refugee Council.
- Completion of IRO stock take and agreed plan reviewed by Youth Commissioners on an ongoing basis
- Revision of Looked After Children Review formats and the implementation of letter writing to children as a summary of their Looked After Children Review

#### **Theme 2: To increase the visibility of the IRO Service, support our colleagues to understand our role, and to build relationships between us that allow high support and high challenge**

- To further embed the success of Midway Reviews as a space in which to improve relationships between our services and achieve better outcomes for children
- For IRO and Team Managers to participate in further workshops with Camden to explore our roles and how to work together better within a Restorative Practice approach
- To deliver monthly workshops to social work staff with the support of Learning and Development to help increase understanding of the IRO role.
- To continue to develop the use of strengthening families, restorative practice, motivational interviewing and systemic practice within the IRO Service through individual and group supervision
- To use key performance indicators to measure the performance of IRO's and Looked After Children admin, to ensure that children, parents, foster carers and other professionals are invited to Looked After Children reviews where required and receive minutes of Looked After Children Reviews.
- To develop analysis of complaints, advocacy, app based consultation to Looked After Children Reviews, and compliments to inform service delivery to looked after children.

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## Annual Report of Croydon IRO Service 2018-2019

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