

<b>REPORT TO:</b>	Corporate Parenting Panel
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	Independent Reviewing Officer Service
<b>LEAD OFFICER:</b>	Roisin Madden Director of Early Help and Children Services
<b>CABINET MEMBER:</b>	Cllr Alisa Flemming Children, Young People and Learners
<b>WARDS:</b>	All
<b>PUBLIC/EXEMPT:</b>	N/A

### **SUMMARY OF REPORT:**

This report is an analysis of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service and its effectiveness and impact on children's and young people's safety and care in Croydon and covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020 to 30<sup>st</sup> September 2021.

We have continued to develop the IRO service as evidenced by:

- Maintained IRO footprint particularly the use of Midway Reviews, sustained timeliness of writing CLA Review records and the embedding of letter writing to children.
- The involvement of IROs in a wider range of practice forums, in which they can provide high support and high challenge to colleagues.
- Increasing inclusion of IROs in wider reviewing functions to support best quality care for children looked after.
- The continuation of respectful and close working relationships between the IROs and social work services which facilitates high support and high challenge.
- Continuing relationships between IROs, children and young people and parents that facilitate effective CLA Reviews and provide meaningful support throughout the child's journey in care.
- Greater participation of children and parents, by use of virtual platforms and convening CLA Reviews in a series of meetings/conversations rather than one meeting and conceptualising the CLA Review as a process, rather than a single meeting.

There remain areas for growth:

- Continuing scope to develop the involvement of children, their families and carers in their meetings and include them in the evaluation and development of our practice, and further development of meeting and gaining children's views before reviews.
- Achieve a 'mixed economy' of CLA Reviews recognising the advantages of on-line meetings, balanced against the needs of children whose meetings would be better for them face to face.

- Quality and availability of Consultation Documents, Progress Reports and current care plans to Child Looked After Reviews
- Continue to evidence impact of IRO involvement to achieve outcomes for children across the entirety of IRO footprint.
- Development of collaborative approach to formal escalation of concerns with QA colleagues.
- Support increased use of Advocacy Services.
- Continue to develop systemic and relationship based practice in the IRO Service.

**POLICY CONTEXT/AMBITIOUS FOR CROYDON:**

Children and young people who are looked after thrive and reach their full potential.

**FINANCIAL IMPACT: None**

**RECOMMENDATIONS: To note the report**

**1. DETAIL OF YOUR REPORT**

***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 Independent Reviewing Officer Service and its effectiveness and impact on children’s and young people’s safety and care in Croydon.

This annual report covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020 to 30<sup>st</sup> September 2021. This report provides qualitative and quantitative data on the service for 2020/21 as outlined in the statutory guidance (IRO handbook 2010) and is produced for scrutiny by the Corporate Parenting Panel.

**1. Introduction**

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.

IROs 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. Croydon's context**

Since the last IRO Annual Report was written the IRO Service has continued to work virtually as the Covid Pandemic gripped the United Kingdom and the nation cycled in and out of periods of social restrictions. Since June 2021 IROs have been returning to aspects of face to face visits to children with in person CLA Reviews increasing since September 2021.

The council faced the financial challenge of being under S1.14 which has led to honest and robust discussions about delivering the best care for children and how to do so most efficiently. IROs have played an important role in this and we are continually strengthening our relationships with other arms of quality assurance. This includes placements, commissioning and fostering.

The profile of children served by the IRO Service has indelibly changed in the same period. Relationship based practice with children and families ensures that more children are able to remain living within their extended family network or achieve permanency by Special Guardianship or Adoption in shorter time frames. There is a continuing decrease of unaccompanied asylum seeking children received into our care. This relates to pan London and nationally the responsibility for meeting these vulnerable children's needs being met equitably.

The experiences of our teenage children who are looked after is in sharp focus, as we recognise the complexities of safeguarding these young people as a corporate parent especially in respect of their emotional and mental health and how we support them to transition to young adulthood.

In the same period the IRO Service has drawn learning with 2 detailed audits of our practice which will be the foundation for the further development of our service and are referenced throughout this report.

Our focus remains on our relationships with children, parents and colleagues, and how we work systemically to achieve best outcomes for children balanced with curiosity and respectful challenge.

## **The IRO Service**

### **4. 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.

The Service manager since February 2018 is Adam Fearon-Stanley, who also has responsibility for the Independent Visitor Service since August 2019 and continues to jointly monitor the Advocacy Service provided by Barnardo's. There are 12 IRO currently in post.

In December 2021 an IRO retires after 48 years of public service to children and a further IRO is electing to move to part time working. With the recruitment of fixed term IRO we expect to maintain IROs caseloads at between 55 and 60 children.

The IROs who have remained in post during this period have strong and enduring relationships with the children and young people they review.

IROs 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 IROs and the children themselves.

The team is predominantly female – of the 12 staff in post, 6 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 3 male IROs of white British ethnic origin.

There are no Black male IROs currently in the team which provides a disparity and lack of representation when compared with children looked after in Croydon.

IROs and managers 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. We have continued to access support from Emma Carwardine, Speech and Language Therapist who has provided IRO with icons, pictures and images to use in letters to children. We have had further training on letters to children as a therapeutic intervention supported by Systemic Practice Service Manager Hendrix Hammond. The IRO Service Manager, and 3 IROs have received systemic training, with all IROs required to undergo this training as it is rolled out. Other training is generic and accessed by IRO and social work staff for example SMART Planning and Contextual Safeguarding sessions have been widely attended across the IRO Service. One of the IROs takes responsibility for maintaining a team library for the service sharing articles and publications relevant to the role and alerting colleagues to new additions.

Peer learning is facilitated via weekly reflective supervision groups with all IROs and complemented by issue specific Appreciative Enquiries led by IRO Service Manager as well as feedback from audits by colleagues.

IROs individual practice is supported by 4 weekly supervision, and observation by LADO and IRO Service Managers of IRO at CLA Reviews (3 time per year).

## **5. Caseloads and Children Looked After**

The recommended average caseload as set by the IRO Handbook for an IRO is between 50 and 70 Children Looked After. During 2020 - 2021 the average IRO case hold has reduced to between 55 and 60 children. Part time IROs (3 days per week) case hold between 34 and 36.

The composition of the Children Looked After population continues to reduce, with numbers of local children looked after now in line with our statistical neighbours at approximately 509 children. A sustained decrease in Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children also continues to ensure that there is sufficient capacity within the IRO service.

As of October 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, 595 children were looked after by the local authority, 136 of which were unaccompanied asylum seeking or separated children. This equates to 62.4 children looked after per 10,000 children, or 48.2 children looked after per 10,000 children if unaccompanied asylum seeking children are discounted. The London

average (LIIA data) for 2021 - 2022 is currently 47 children looked after per 10,000 children.

There has been a 20% reduction in Looked After Children since the last IRO Annual Report where 720 children were in our care. This has been achieved through the continuing focus upon supporting children to return to, or remain with their families and robust scrutiny of wider family and legal alternatives to children becoming looked after (e.g. Special Guardianship).

Of the children looked after in October 2021 210 children were looked after under S20 agreements, of which 136 children were unaccompanied asylum seeking children. 89 children were subject to Interim Care Orders and within Family Court proceedings. 265 children were subject to full Care Orders and remained in the care of the Local Authority. 21 children were subject to Placement Orders with the plan to seek Adoptive Carers for them. There is a continuing focus on children, subject to Care Orders who are placed with family members or whose family circumstances have changed where social work teams are assessing whether these orders can be discharged.

There has been maintained improvements in Personal Education Plans for children with the percentage of children having a Personal Education Plan steadily improving and in reaching 95% of children looked after having an in date PEP. 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 been maintained at above 85% of all children. There continues to be a focus on Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires with all children and ensuring that these are used to evaluate children's emotional and mental wellbeing with them.

## **6. Footprint of the IRO:**

IROs convened 1722 CLA Reviews in the reporting year for 795 children. IROs carried out 840 Midway Reviews in the period 31<sup>st</sup> October 2020 to 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021. IROs collectively record an average of 400 - 500 case notes per month, capturing their work with children, families and colleagues. There is an increase in the use of midway reviews to 60 – 70 children benefitting from these each month, demonstrating that this practice is now well embedded.

I anticipate that our footprint will continue to change, as the number of children looked after reduces and we continue to evaluate how we record our interventions in summary and streamlined to demonstrate impact not only tasks carried out. The number of case notes may decrease if midway reviews are used creatively to capture different strands of work in a short time period for instance. Alternately midway reviews may increase for the same reasons.

Our end of year reporting to the DFE for 2020 – 2021 shows that 95% of children had all of their CLA Reviews within time frame. Current reporting indicates that this performance is being sustained. There is a focus on ensuring that children receive timely CLA Reviews when their living arrangements change with monthly checks by the IRO Service Manager.

This indicator does not measure the overall timeliness (95% of reviews are in time) and relies upon every review for a child being within time during the year. The reasons for the small proportion of reviews being out of time frame:

- A proportion of initial CLA Reviews are convened late, sometimes by as little as a day. This is due to availability of staff in short time windows of 20 days, some relates to human error.
- Incorrect recording where a series of meetings is used to undertake a full review and the first meeting is not used as the date of the CLA Review. IROs are aware of the need to be vigilant.
- Both of these are addressed by ongoing checks by IRO service manager on a fortnightly basis to highlight where planned dates are not correctly entered.

IRO footprint also seen in a wide range of contexts that enable them to contribute to the quality of care and care planning outside of the Child Looked After Review process. Such as Care Panel, Permanency Panel, Child Looked After Review Panel, Annual Foster Carer reviews, and Risk Assessments for the placing of children and young people into Semi Independent living arrangements

IROs are using Pre Meetings and Midway Reviews to follow up with SW teams whether Care Plans have been regularly updated after CLA Reviews and also that Progress Reports are available. Progress Reports are provided to every CLA Review by social worker to assess the child's needs and the progress made in implementing their care plan between CLA Reviews. This led to a sustained improvement in the availability of Progress Reports to the IRO to prepare for CLA Reviews but not consistently to children (if age appropriate) and other participants in advance of the meetings taking place.

Midway Reviews support progress when used well and where IROs are specific in linking the progress of care plans to outcomes for children. Overall there is a higher level of oversight and IROs continue to contribute to practice by supporting discussions about relationship based practice and focusing on children's needs in the context of care planning. In our thematic audit we found that *'IROs speak with children and practitioners about the child's story and there were examples of careful thought about how children understand what is happening now and how they might understand their story as care experienced adults. Social workers report that discussions with IROs are helpful and suggest different approaches and other ways of approaching difficult issues without supplanting the social worker and team manager relationship'*.

Over the next 6 months there will be a renewed focus to explore the quality of our care plans for children and young people with children, social workers, and team managers. While there are many good and improving plans, IROs continue to face dilemmas when reviewing children's plans which they will raise with colleagues We anticipate this will be reflected in their footprint i.e within the records of Review Meetings, Midway Reviews and case notes.

Our aspiration is that Care Plans for children will set out how a child's needs are met, in a way that recognises the child's lived experience of trauma, loss, or change. For our children's Care Plans to be co-produced and used with children and parents as

dynamic documents which are timely and congruent with the child's court care plan which reflect changes in their life. To support social workers to reflect contingency planning, including parallel plans for Permanence i.e. communicating the dynamic nature of planning for children where we are simultaneously assessing different permanency options.

IROs offer (with the young person's consent) to chair additional Pathway Plan Review or first CIN meetings for children and young people after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, or after they return home to support transition planning.

IROs are now able to recommend permanency arrangements for children that are over 14 years, e.g. recommend matching children with their long term carers. This enables children to be at the centre of this decision making, as the recommendation is made as part of their own review in which they participate with trusted adults. We aspire for this to be a celebration for the young person. IRO are working to achieve this for a number of young people.

### **Themes and issues.**

The number of children looked after by Croydon, continues to reduce, and reflects robust management oversight that recognises that wherever possible children should be supported to remain within their birth families thus limiting state intervention in their lives. This reflects the growing influence of our practice model (systemic and relationship based approaches) which enables us to work with children and families effectively to achieve this. The IROs are part of this oversight, monitoring children's care plans to ensure that children where possible can return home or to other family arrangements in a timely way or alternately that they receive the best possible care.

IROs are contributing to the quality of care for children in a number of ways. We have worked with social work teams to promote staying put arrangements for children with their foster carers after they are 18 leading to substantial increases in these arrangements. IROs have highlighted individually and collectively vulnerabilities in our transition pathways between children and adults services. All IROs are participating in a 6 month period of targeted work with commissioning and placements to evaluate the quality of care for children in semi-independent placements. As a service we are linking with Fostering Reviewing Officers to strengthen relationships and develop how we feed into Annual Fostering Reviews for Croydon's foster carers and vice versa. Over the next 6 months IROs will be linking to specialist areas of practice such as Contextual Safeguarding, SEND, Children in Custody and EMPIRE.

*Our thematic audit told us 'IROs have advocated for children at important times in their life and promote a positive view of children. IROs have been able to build trusting relationships with children through which there is common focus between IROs on the need to ensure appropriate support is provided to children to recover from the trauma and loss experienced. Despite this at times practical processes predominate, rather than always exploring emotional wellbeing and this can be reflected within care plans that are reviewed at CLA Reviews'.*

*'To ensure that IROs cover all the areas required of them by the IRO handbook, there is a similarity in the agenda across children's meetings. This brought a focus on key areas such as health, education and social relationships that overall was positive'.*

*'This can also bring a focus on ensuring that processes or tasks were on track 'has the PEP happened, has the health assessment happened, has the SGO assessment progressed, or contact reviewed' 'refer for CAMHS' while vitally important that the IRO performs this quality assurance role this can unintentionally divert from exploratory conversations with children, parents and the network that focus on trauma and how to support the child and carers to manage trauma. This can also introduce language that is unhelpful to children as it has no meaning to them'.*

*'At times, this process focus meant that the higher context of the plans direction was not always explored i.e. the potential return of children home or the barriers that prevented the securing of a Special Guardianship Order. Nonetheless IROs were sighted on the progress of the plan overall. When these questions were explored in CLA Reviews it could be difficult. Social workers, while valuing the contribution of the IRO to care planning and discussion outside of CLA Reviews in one instance felt blamed by the IRO identifying that there had been drift and delay in the meeting when a parent was present. More often these bigger questions were explored entirely separately from the meeting with the child but did not always appear in recordings of the review itself'.*

*'All IROs could readily explain the direction of travel for the children that they worked with. We also saw key interventions by the IRO in care planning such as a return home which had not been sufficiently assessed, contact proceeding without the relevant contact assessment, and a delayed International Adoption'.*

Narrative approaches in social work such as life story work, and our letter writing to children help children understand their journey in care, and hence their own identity and relationships with others. IROs continue to work with colleagues to ensure that at every stage of a child's journey we are gathering the objects, photos, recordings and mementos that we need to do this work. There remains however a level of inconsistency in our practice as a local authority.

#### Good Practice Example:

An IRO established that life story work had not been undertaken with a young person as agreed at the previous CLA Review. The IRO supported the social worker to gather the material required, and located the child's photo album (which was at her primary school) of their family, previous carers and themselves during proceedings and the first year that the child was looked after. This enabled good life story work to be undertaken by the social worker, and was also a priceless discovery for the young person.

IROs are invited to all Final Evidence Meetings (FEM) to facilitate discussion and understanding of proposed care plans by SW teams. IROs are also invited to Permanency Planning Meetings (PPM) where their independent oversight is able to challenge decisions at an early stage. IROs are closer to care planning for children through their attendance at these meetings and this facilitates a high level of both support and challenge to their colleagues.

Feedback from the IRO link with CAFCASS Guardians is contact between IROs and guardians has improved, with increased communication and IROs easier to reach, particularly when there was a contentious care planning issue that required discussion. Guardian attendance at CLA Reviews has increased whilst they have been held virtually. We will continue to evaluate how this changes as CLA Reviews revert to more face to face arrangements.

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

- the management of family time between siblings, particularly after final orders are granted, and ensuring that family time with parents and important people in children's lives continue to be enabled, and also re-assessed if required to ensure it is in the best interests of children.

- Placement stability for children looked after has generally improved. There remains difficulties 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. This reflects pan London and national challenges in accessing care for some children especially teenagers.

- managing transitions for children and young people between social work teams and when allocated social workers change, and when leaving our care continues to require monitoring by the IRO who highlight appropriately when this is impacting on children and young people.

- developing consistency in the application of savings policies for looked after children. Both for children in care and establishing effective processes for future children looked after. This continues to be pursued by an IRO, who has worked collaboratively across social work and business support services to highlight how children can access Junior ISA, Children's Trust Funds and savings held by foster carers for them.

## **7. Participation**

Where children, parent, and carers feel heard, children's meetings and wider IRO involvement can be a platform for children and parents to understand children's care plans that is invaluable.

Our child participation in CLA Review's target is that 80% of children will participate in their CLA Review. This target will be increased to reflect the importance of children's participation being facilitated by IROs.

During the period April 2020 – April 2021 76% of children had participated in their CLA Review. This has continued to spike with variance as great as 86% of children participating in April 2021 for instance, and 72% in the following month. As of writing on October 2021 cumulative participation of children over the year ending April 2022 so far is 76%.

In our thematic audit we found that *'without exception IROs go to great lengths to support children to be part of their meeting. IROs used various approaches to achieve this based on the wishes and feelings of children and their professional judgement. Older children often stayed in the entirety of their meetings with younger children having separate meetings or joining parts. Wider professional participation is frequently facilitated by using a series of meetings to keep meetings that children are in smaller and it is apparent that the concept of the child looked after review as a single meeting does not always reflect our practice'*.

We have committed to a number of mutually agreed approaches to support increased participation wherever possible before, during and after children's meetings. This involves making greater effort to ensure each child's view of how a review should take place is obtained and respected.

Analysis of participation by age of child to date shows us that while overall participation has marginally increased, the percentage of different age groups attending overall has increased by a greater margin across the majority of age groups. This is indicative of IROs continuing efforts to increase children's involvement in their meetings and using different approaches to achieve this.

#### **CLA 12 - Percentage of CLA who have participated in Reviews (aged 4+) as of 1<sup>st</sup> September 2021**

Current Age	2020-2021			2021-2022 (YTD)		
	Reviews	Participated	Percentage Participated	Reviews	Participated	Percentage Participated
4	19	6	31.6%	7	3	42.9%
5	31	9	29.0%	8	2	25.0%
6	31	12	38.7%	12	6	50.0%
7	47	19	40.4%	15	9	60.0%
8	38	9	23.7%	9	5	55.6%
9	50	27	54.0%	15	11	73.3%
10	63	36	57.1%	19	16	84.2%
11	73	44	60.3%	18	13	72.2%
12	69	38	55.1%	23	15	65.2%
13	94	68	72.3%	28	18	64.3%
14	116	85	73.3%	31	22	71.0%
15	131	105	80.2%	48	44	91.7%
16	234	208	88.9%	70	64	91.4%
17	385	326	84.7%	105	88	83.8%
18	430	358	83.3%	47	41	87.2%
19	28	23	82.1%			
26	3	1	33.3%			
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1842</b>	<b>1374</b>	<b>74.6%</b>	<b>455</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>78.5%</b>

There will be continuing dip sampling and feedback between IRO Service Manager and IROs to explore this and continue to increase child participation.

Re-design of consultation documents for children, carers and parents is underway on the basis that these documents will be shorter, and hence more accessible with open questions.

## **8. Examples of the impact of the IRO**

The consistency of an IRO in a child's life over time cannot be underestimated. Children meet a large number of professionals during their journey in care, few can be as constant as an IRO who knows their story, and them well.

Examples of feedback:

*Hi xxxx,*

*I just wanted to say thank you for everything you have done for me over the years. Out of everyone that has been in my life through social services your the only one who is still here. Thank you for not giving up on me and always being there.*

Message from child to IRO April 2021

*Dear xxxx,*

*Yesterday, I have received my A-Level results.  
I just wanted to say thank you so much for what you have done for me.  
I'm in deep gratitude for your support, dedications and hard work.  
I know sometimes it's not always easy but you have done brilliantly despite of the Covid.*

Message from child to IRO, July 2021

These messages convey the value of the IRO's relationships with their children, these relationships enable IROs to support children and social work teams outside of the children's meetings.

Good Practice Example:

A child had said that they had been hurt by their carer. Their allocated social worker was on annual leave. The IRO attended with a police officer to speak with the child, to help that child feel reassured when meeting a stranger. This ensured that the social work teams could progress safety planning for the child, and the child felt heard by adults.

During the reporting period IROs have continued to explore how they can use their relationships with children and those important to them (including parents) to engage children in their reviews and actively achieve better outcomes for them.

Good Practice Example:

A parent and daughter felt disenfranchised with the CLA Review process. After reflection with the professional group, a different approach (with the child looked after's consent) was attempted, where parent and daughter co-chaired the CLA Review. This improved the quality of the family's participation and led to parent and daughter attending future CLA Reviews.

## **9. Letters to Children**

Our letters to children are how we provide the child with a record of their meeting which is accessible to them and promotes their participation. This practice is now well embedded and was recognised as good practice by Ofsted.

Children are positive about receiving letters and some have relayed that it has enabled them to understand their care journey much better. For others it can remind them of the agreements made at their meetings and they use the letters to remind social workers of what was agreed.

## **10. Involvement of families**

IROs recognise that children's relationships with their families are vital and that we have a duty to continue to promote these. IROs have made a concerted effort to ensure that parents and children's wider family are included in CLA Reviews where appropriate.

Good Practice Example:

4 brothers and sisters were allocated a new social worker, as care proceedings had culminated in all 4 children being subject to care orders. The IRO's relationship with the father and wider family supported the new social worker to explore and plan contact creatively with the family, ensuring that contact continued despite the father's continuing disagreement with aspects of contact as directed by court.

Dip sampling by IRO Service Managers continues to indicate an increase in parental participation overall in CLA Reviews and this is a continuing trend from last year.

## **Dispute resolution and escalation**

A significant aspect of IROs' 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).

Good Practice Example:

- xxxx it's a pleasure to work with you, this one really got us thinking on many occasions, xxxx and I have valued your advice and support from the beginning.

## Feedback from team manager, September 2021

The Croydon Escalation and Resolution Process (CERP) shows that 33 CERPs have been raised by IROs in relation to 28 children this year. This is a continuing reduction by almost a third in the number of CERPs raised in the previous reporting year. This reduction is a reflection of the impact of increased oversight of care planning through formal panels and an improved reflective culture at midway reviews where challenge to care planning is viewed as positive and helpful.

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
- A child not being visited, or required reports or care plans not being completed for the Child Looked after Review

Our challenge and scrutiny is increasingly present outside of the CERP process and our increased IRO footprint evidences our high support and high challenge within a continuum of IRO activity.

### Good Practice Example:

An IRO observed a fraught relationship between a mother and a mother and baby foster carer. Despite this, both mother and carer described their relationship as very positive. The IRO explored with the supervising social worker how the foster carer was supported, and how she fed back to her supervising social worker any concern that she had. With further exploration by the supervising social worker it was identified that there were difficulties between the adults that required intervention. This improved the quality of care the baby received.

The strength of our relationships with colleagues, enables our challenge to collaborative and contributes to wider discussions in networks about the care planning.

### Good Practice Example:

I have been very impressed by their joint up working approach and active involvement in attending meetings to share information, reflect, respectfully challenge and hold xxx at the forefront of decision making.

They have each contributed in the planning and decision-making and I think they set an outstanding example of how social worker's, IRO's and guardians should work together to carefully consider and plan for children's future care. Their ability to value each other's views and take on each other's suggestions has led to child centred and good care planning for xxxx.

## Feedback from team manager, July 2021

The IRO Service Manager supports the IRO's challenge and scrutiny by convening issue specific meetings alongside the IRO. Ongoing concerns are communicated to senior managers where they have not been resolved and options are explored to achieve best outcomes.

Good Practice Example:

- An IRO was concerned that a Care Act assessment had not been begun, and a social worker from the Transitions Team had not been allocated to undertake this. The IRO raised an alert to the Director who spoke with counterparts in Adult Services. Subsequently the young person was allocated a social worker and the Care Act assessment was begun.

*In our thematic audit, 'we found that as a service we continue to face dilemmas about when the threshold to raise a formal escalation is met. There is concern at whether these are effective ways of resolving practice issues for children and progressing children's care plans which is our highest context. This is particularly the case when the use of complaints, advocacy or informal discussion is achieving the same objectives. In this audit several issues were seen where a CERP would have been merited. This included a child not being visited in timescale and over a number of months, the repeated failure to enact previous review decision in the context of re-allocation of social workers and decision making being made outside of the appropriate level of operational management'.*

*'IROs are intervening effectively on children's behalf on discrete care issues but continue to use informal means over and above formal escalation. This can obscure the impact that they have had to improve outcomes for children in care. This is also a measure of effective relationships with colleagues. These have been steadily improved over the last 2 years and accelerated by IROs' accessibility while working virtually'.*

The existing formal escalation process – CERPS – will be reviewed across Quality Assurance. We wish to explore the development of an approach that privilege's collaborative working with colleagues and enables IRO to meet the expectation that they formally identify good practice and also drift and delay.

## **11. Complaints and Compliments:**

The Complaints leaflet revised in 2017-18 for children and young people is distributed by CLA admin to all children and carers who receive invites to Looked After Children Reviews.

Several IROs 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.

Where practice issues are raised informally, the IRO Service Manager addresses this, usually by bringing the professional network together, to explore our different perspectives and agree the best way forward.

The IRO Service Manager meets quarterly with the Children's Complaints Officer to highlight themes in complaints. They are also copied to the weekly Complaints bulletin.

We have been encouraging IROs to recognise and promote good practice where they see it. IROs praise both social workers practice with children and the quality of their written work and presentation. It is recognised by the IRO Service that alongside challenge we need to continue to support our colleagues through recognising good work.

## **12. 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 to 97 children looked after (as of October 2021) and this reflects the average number of children, young people and care leavers open to their service at any one time. A range of issues have been addressed including;

- Quality of housing to care leavers
- Savings and entitlements predominantly care leavers
- Supporting children and young people in CLA Reviews, or to express their views about proposed changes in living arrangements that they do not agree to.

Good Practice Example:

An IRO referred a 17 year old young person for Advocacy, who did not wish to move from her semi-independent placement. The IRO arranged the CLA Review in a series of meetings to enable the advocate to take part and support the young person to express their views. The young person remained in the placement until after her exams when she moved to a new tenancy.

The IRO Service Manager has supported the Advocacy Service to further raise specific children and young people with senior managers where issues being pursued continue to be unresolved.

Barnardo's Advocacy Leaflet for children and young people is distributed by CLA admin to all children and carers who receive invites to Looked After Children Reviews.

It is recognised, that the Advocacy Service is underused by children and young people under the age of 18 years, relative to the number of children looked after in Croydon with Care Leavers.

There are quarterly meetings to plan and support promotion and referral to Advocacy directly to children, and also to raise awareness in the social work teams. Additionally a survey is being used to explore the understanding of Advocacy amongst all staff to plan focused work around this issue, particularly with children with disabilities and children in custody.

**Conclusion:**

We have continued to develop the IRO service as evidenced by:

- Maintained IRO footprint particularly the use of Midway Reviews, sustained timeliness of writing CLA Review records and the embedding of letter writing to children.
- The involvement of IROs in a wider range of practice forums, in which they can provide high support and high challenge to colleagues.
- Increasing inclusion of IROs in wider reviewing functions to support best quality care for children looked after.
- The continuation of respectful and close working relationships between the IROs and social work services which facilitates high support and high challenge.
- Continuing relationships between IROs, children and young people and parents that facilitate effective CLA Reviews and provide meaningful support throughout the child's journey in care.
- Greater participation of children and parents, by use of virtual platforms and convening CLA Reviews in a series of meetings/conversations rather than one meeting and conceptualising the CLA Review as a process, rather than a single meeting.

There remain areas for growth:

- Continuing scope to develop the involvement of children, their families and carers in their meetings and include them in the evaluation and development of our practice, and further development of meeting and gaining children's views before reviews.
- Achieve a 'mixed economy' of CLA Reviews recognising the advantages of on-line meetings, balanced against the needs of children whose meetings would be better for them face to face.
- Quality and availability of Consultation Documents, Progress Reports and current care plans to Child Looked After Reviews
- Continue to evidence impact of IRO involvement to achieve outcomes for children across the entirety of IRO footprint.
- Development of collaborative approach to formal escalation of concerns with QA colleagues.
- Support increased use of Advocacy Services.
- Continue to develop systemic and relationship based practice in the IRO Service.

## **2. CONSULTATION**

**N/A**

## **3. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS**

### **3.1. Revenue and Capital consequences of report recommendations**

N/A

**3.2. The effect of the decision**

N/A

**3.3. Risks**

N/A

**3.4. Options**

N/A

**3.5. Future savings/efficiencies**

N/A

**4. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

**4.1. None**

**5. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT**

**5.1. None**

**6. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

**6.1. None**

**7. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT**

**7.1. None**

**8. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT**

**8.1. None**

**9. DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS**

**9.1. WILL THE SUBJECT OF THE REPORT INVOLVE THE PROCESSING OF 'PERSONAL DATA'?**

**NO**

*(If yes, please provide brief details as to what 'personal data' will be processed and complete the next question).*

*(If no, please complete the sign off)*

9.2. **HAS A DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT (DPIA) BEEN COMPLETED?**

**N/A**

9.3. Approved by: Róisín Madden Director of Early Help & Children's Social Care

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**APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT**

*None*

**BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:**

*None*