

## Annual Report of Croydon IRO Service 2017-2018

Reporting Period	1 <sup>st</sup> April 2017 – 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2018
Report of	INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE – Quality Assurance Team Head of Service: Tom Stevenson
Report to	Corporate Parenting Panel
Report Originators	Karen Massey
Date of Report	26 <sup>th</sup> July 2018

***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 2017/18 as required by statutory guidance.

1. Introduction

This annual report has been produced under the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. 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.

This report is prepared for those with executive responsibility for children's services and corporate parenting, to enable consideration of the services on offer, and to consider whether the local authority is achieving optimum outcomes for our looked after children. This report must be presented to Corporate Parenting Board.

This report provides an opportunity to highlight areas of good practice and areas for improvement, to identify emerging themes and trends, to report on work undertaken to date and outline the service development priorities for the coming twelve months.

2. Profile of the Croydon IRO Service

The Independent Reviewing service operates within the framework of the IRO Handbook. This is statutory guidance issued to local authorities in 2011. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement and quality assurance of the Care Planning for Looked after Children and for 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.

The Independent Reviewing Service is sited within the Quality Assurance Service in Croydon. We benefit from close links with the Child Protection Conference Chairs and the Local Authority Designated Officer. There was no administrative support for the service until November 2017 when a single post was allocated to the service.

The IRO service is managed by the Quality Assurance Manager with the lead for Looked After Children's Services. Karen Massey held this role between April 2017 and January 2018 when she retired. Adam Fearon-Stanley now leads the service. The Local Authority Designated Officer assists with supervision and appraisal of 5 of the IRO staff.

The service is staffed by 14 IRO's. All but two of them are full time employees and only 3 are Agency staff. There was no staff turnover during the reporting period although two members of the team were unwell for a period. Their colleagues were able to cover their planned reviews for the most part although a few needed to be re-scheduled.

As a result of the stable staff team IRO's 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.

The team is predominantly female- of the 14 staff in post, 7 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 all of white British ethnic origin.

All IROs have at least 5 years post-qualifying experience as a social worker and are registered as social workers with the Health Professionals Council. Several of our IRO's have previously held managerial roles in other service areas.

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, arranged by the service to meet the specific requirements of IROs, while other training is more generic accessed by a wide range of social work staff. 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 on a number of occasions during the year. It is the intention of the service to formalise this expectation during this year to give managers the opportunity to identify good practice and offer graded feedback on the performance of all IROs.

IROs were responsible for chairing Missing Strategy meetings until June of 2017. This proved helpful in some cases where the oversight of the IRO helped identify areas where Social Workers were struggling to make coherent plans for children or young people who were particularly challenging to care for. After June 2017 the Team Managers took on the chairing role although IROs do still contribute to the meetings.

IROs have been involved in a number of training and development sessions alongside colleagues on the Strengthening Families model in the early part of 2018. One team member sits on the Adoption panel for the authority, one is part of the Fostering Panel and others regularly take part in selection panels for the Independent Visitor Service. Adam is now going to be part of the Fostering Panel.

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 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.

### 3. OFSTED Inspection 2017

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.

It was hard to hear the message from Inspectors about the standard of service we offered in Croydon. As an IRO service staff felt they had done their best to challenge poor practice with individual staff. They also recognised that this had not always been evidenced either in recording or in changes to the outcomes for the children and young people concerned. We recognised that we had to play our part in identifying poor practice and helping the organisation move forward to improve outcomes for children.

The IRO service were active in developing the Improvement Plan as well as continuing to work with colleagues in this challenging time. At the IRO away day in October we focussed on the actions identified in the Improvement Plan for our service. We looked at our role in creating an open system where

challenge is welcomed and views are respected. We also discussed ways to listen to children and understand more about their lived experience when we met them both during and outside their reviews.

We also focussed on our away day on the importance of good quality Care Planning. As a service we believe all children looked after by Croydon benefit from a clear plan for their future. This is best achieved by collaboration between their social worker, the child or young person themselves where they are able to contribute, carers and also with family members who are able to prioritise the child's needs appropriately. We looked at how we could seek to ensure that Care Plans are coherent and relevant to the child and young person's needs and have their best interests at their centre. We recognised that we have a responsibility to identify patterns of concern that emerge in respect of individual children and collectively, and to make senior leaders aware.

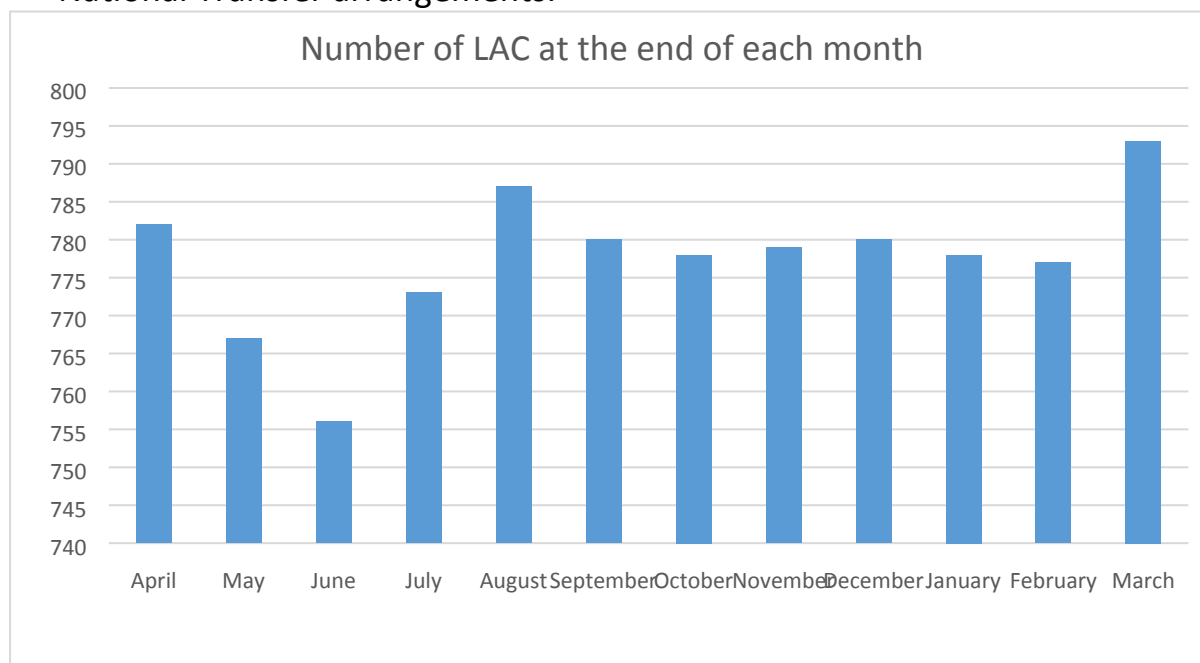
As part of the Improvement Plan the Croydon Escalation Resolution Protocol which is required by the IRO handbook was re written and re-launched in January 2018. The main changes were that the informal challenges raised by IROs were now to be captured and reported on within our electronic recording system, CRS. There was also an emphasis in the document on resolving matters quickly and on making challenge as constructive as possible. We are tracking the new process to check that it is effective by producing quarterly reports on themes and results from the challenges made which are shared with Children Services Management Team.

The OFSTED improvement plan identified a need for improved administrative support for the service. 1 administrator was appointed and we have initially focussed on reducing the monitoring forms activity which IROs were completing monthly. There has also been more support for assisting with scanning and uploading consultation documents which children and carers complete before the reviews.

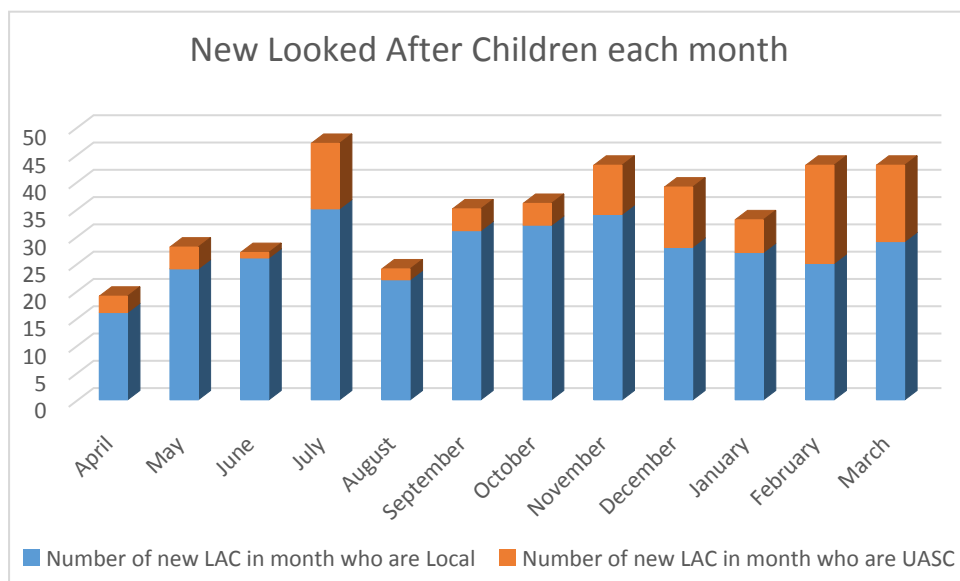
#### 4. Quantitative Information about the IRO Service in Croydon

The recommended average caseload for an IRO is between 50 and 70. Our IRO's average between 60 and 64 cases each. Numbers are not a true indicator of workload as this varies a great deal depending on the locations of placements, 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 peaking in March at 793.

Peaks in the newly looked after population are a challenge for the whole service including the Independent Reviewing Officers as we are required to conduct initial reviews within 20 days of the child or young person being placed. We have a local target to review children who are under 5 and their siblings within 10 days of their placement and have largely managed to meet this as long as the service has been informed of the placement (via the record on CRS) on time. The 20 day target can prove challenging when Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children have been placed at a distance from Croydon. This has happened more often this year as part of the National Transfer arrangements.



As can be seen from the chart above the number of children and young people looked after in Croydon has varied between 755 and 793 throughout the year.

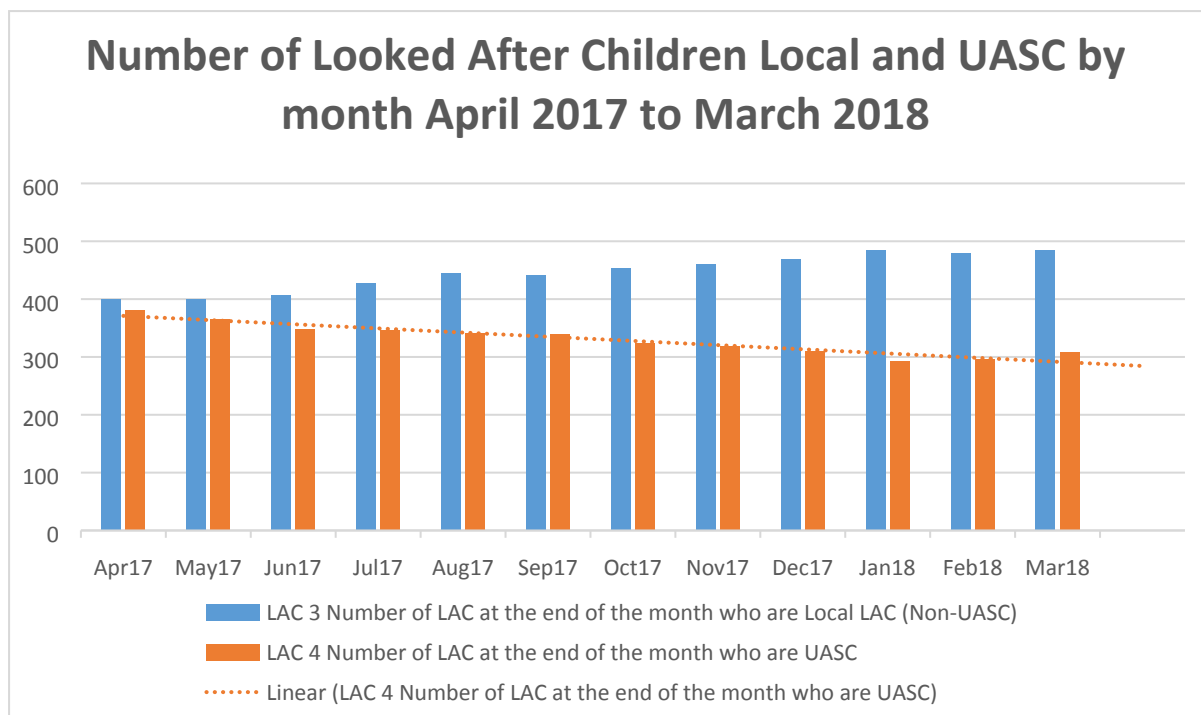


In July, November, February and March the number of New Looked after children exceeded 40. In February and March this was due to a high number of new Unaccompanied Asylum seeking children needing our care whereas in July and November the number of local children entering care was higher.

Croydon’s unique position as the first place of call for all Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children under 16 seen by the Home Office in Lunar House meant that almost half the Looked After Children we cared for (49%) were in this group at the beginning of the year. The chart below shows that this has changed over the year and the proportion of UASC Looked after children is now 39% of the whole looked after population.

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. The service also conduct Age Assessments as appropriate and this adds a level of complexity to assessment, service provision and review.





This chart shows that although the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children being cared for in Croydon fell steadily throughout the year this was offset by an increase in the number of local looked after children. The latest reported comparative figures for England were reported in March 2017. The average across England was 448 . Croydon local LAC for this period was 395 which is 13% less than England average and 15% less than our statistical neighbours,

#### Deaths of Looked After Children:

During the reporting year two children in our care sadly died. Both cases are subject to Serious Case Review.

## Children and Young People Leaving Care:

Table 4. Nos. of children leaving care with reasons	April 2017 to March 2018	
	Number of children	% of all leaving care
In care on remand – came to an end	8	1.79%
Adopted - application unopposed	10	2.24%
Adopted- consent dispensed with	2	0.45%
Age assessment determined UASC to be aged 18 or over	13	2.91%
Care taken over by another LA in the UK	73	16.37%
Sentenced to Custody	11	2.47%
Child died, subject to Serious Case Review	2	0.45%
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) query	69	15.47%
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)	77	17.26%
Returned Home under Child Arrangement Order	6	1.35%
Return home to live with parents, relatives, or other person with parental responsibility as part of the care planning process	30	6.73%
Return home to live with parents, relatives, or other person with parental responsibility which was not part of the care planning process	47	10.54%
Special guardianship order made to carers other than former foster carers	17	3.81%
Special guardianship order made to former foster carers	10	2.24%
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	15.92%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>446</b>	<b>100%</b>

5. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and the National Transfer Scheme

The National Transfer Scheme was launched in July 2016 to encourage all local authorities to volunteer to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) so 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

102 Unaccompanied asylum seeking children who arrived in Croydon in this reporting period 58 were referred to the National Transfer Scheme as suitable for transfer.

Of these 58 children and young people 5 have transferred to other authorities under the scheme. 19 are placed with Foster Carers in a number of other local authorities in anticipation of their transferring to these authorities when the regions have capacity. The intention is that these children remain in their settled placements as they are placed with Independent Foster Carers. 20 children have remained in Croydon and it is deemed to be in their best interests to stay here.

14 of this group were found to be over 16 following Age Assessment and were placed by other London authorities.

The IROs have been active in ensuring that children placed on the National Transfer scheme understood what was happening to them and why. In compiling this report I have audited a number of cases on the scheme and it is clear that IROs were active in ensuring the young people concerned knew what they could expect as a result of being on the scheme. The IROs were particularly concerned that the children and young people understood that the placement they were in was a stable one. They listened carefully to concerns raised about cultural appropriateness of placements and about 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 as well as family life in their new home.

## 6. Local Looked After Children Themes and issues.

The rise in the number of local looked after children is concerning. Croydon has in the past had lower numbers of Local Looked After Children than the English average so this increase may have brought us more into line with national and local figures. There are measures in place to ensure that the right children are being looked after. The IRO Manager attends the Edge of Care Panel alongside a multi- agency group of professionals to ensure that all avenues to support families to stay together are explored. It is clear that 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 and 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 collaborating more with the children's guardians once cases are in proceedings. The overall increase in local looked after children subject to a care order during the year was 40 whilst the increase in local children subject to section 20 was only 16. This does suggest that the social work teams are following guidance issued in November 2018 to ensure that Section 20 powers are used appropriately and the IROs have been able to refer to this in review and challenge in cases where they believe proceedings should be issued.

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.

Pre Birth Assessments and permanency decision making for children under one has been an area of focus for the Care Planning Service this year. During the reporting year 34 children under one year old came into care in Croydon. Of these all but 4 were in proceedings by the end of the year. Two babies had been placed for adoption at their mother's request. In the remaining cases IROs had challenged teams when progress in planning for permanence appeared to be drifting. A brief thematic review showed that the mothers of 17 of these babies had previously had one or more children removed from their care, often by an authority other than Croydon. Further analysis of this cohort will be undertaken this year in order to establish whether an earlier strategic intervention with these mothers would be beneficial.

## 7. Timeliness of reviews:

Data in this area is difficult to track month on month as the time lag for IRO's recording reviews is 20 days and the system reporting has been hampered by an absence of timely pre meeting reports from social workers. I undertook an analysis of LAC reviews held in the reporting period. The 903 return shows that 71% of reviews were held on time. This figure is low and reflects the fact that if a single review in the reporting period is out of timescale all reviews for that child are deemed to be late.

Analysis of the data revealed that 84% of the 2009 reviews held during the year were done on time. This was achieved by reviewing officers scheduling reviews one month early. If one review fell out of timescale subsequent reviews were scheduled to ensure they were on time.

7% of the 1019 children who had reviews during the year had three or more review meetings. For some this was because they were newly looked after in the year but for others it reflected the IRO scheduling Reviews to track and chase progress in complex cases.

The majority of reviews out of timescale were the initial reviews. This is understandable as the allocation and arrangement for initial reviews requires a fast turnaround for all concerned. Without adequate administrative support across the service arranging these initial meetings has proved challenging.

#### Timeliness of Reviews

What are we doing about it?

- Establishing an efficient IRO allocation system using reports on children becoming looked after in CRS
- One LAC Administrator has been appointed and we have requested Business Support in QA to manage the whole review process to reduce this burden on the IROs and social workers
- Working with Service Managers across Care Planning and Permanence Teams to ensure Pre Meeting Reports and Care Plans are completed so that reports can accurately flag issues where Reviews are not completed to managers.

#### 8. Qualitative Information about IRO Activity

One of the concerns OFSTED had on their visit was the lack of visibility of the IRO Service on the case records and particularly evidence of how they managed concerns and challenged poor practice. This was due to two main issues.

Recording of reviews was often done 'off system' because pre meeting reports and care plans were not being updated on the system by social workers. This practice had become embedded and needed to change. It made it difficult to manage performance of IROs in terms of timeliness of recording as well as holding the meetings.

The requirement to complete an update of the Care Plan and a pre meeting report prior to each Review had been agreed by the Heads of Service but practice still fell short of expectations. As a service we considered postponing reviews until reports were done but felt this was unfair on the children and young people. Instead IROs still reminded staff of the need to do the work but would ensure their minutes appeared on the system in case notes. Not all IRO staff have adhered to this practice throughout the year and this is an issue which is being raised in individual supervision with them. In addition Service Managers and Head of Services are made aware of outstanding Pre Meeting Reports or cases with out of date care plans by reports generated by the Performance Team and sent to them each week.

Participation of children and young people in reviews is a priority for all IROs. 81% of Children and young people over 4 took part in and contributed to their reviews last year. There is also clear evidence in the recording checked for this report that IROs are meeting and talking to children and young people before their reviews as well as in between meetings. Here are just two stories about what happened as a result of such conversations.

### *A Bigger Fish*

*In conversation at one of his reviews Rajesh (not his real name), mentioned that he had enjoyed going fishing with his Foster Carer on a trip to the sea. Rajesh was an asylum seeking child who had been in the UK for 2 years and was 16. His IRO talked to him about his experience of fishing. They agreed to meet up for the IRO to show Rajesh how to do fly fishing. The IRO took along some equipment he no longer used and gave it to Rajesh after their fishing lesson. Rajesh has continued the pursuit with support from his carers. This is his latest catch!*



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### *Involving Parents and Listening to Children*

*One IRO had been reviewing the Care Plans for a group of siblings for several years. At one review as result of a request from their father the children started to discuss that they needed to know about their past. What they decided they wanted was to hear from their parents about why they had made the choices they had which had resulted in them needing to be looked after by the Local Authority. The IRO and Social Workers for the whole sibling group got together and with support from the different foster carers of the children and their Supervising Social workers devised a plan to make this important conversation possible. They met with the children and parents both separately and together and supported the children to have this challenging conversation direct with their father first and then with their mother. This was a cathartic process for all concerned and a real example of children being listened to and heard in their reviews.*

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## **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 in 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 little evidence of challenge and any changes as a result of such challenges were harder to track.

The IRO manager encouraged staff to reflect on their recording practice and there was a notable increase in the use of case notes identifying the IRO had a concern about a case or issue towards the end of the reporting year. Over 900 such notes were completed during the reporting period on various subjects. This is far more than the previous year and is reflective both of greater challenge by IROs where basic tasks are not being completed to support care planning and a more rigorous approach to recording these issues by the team.

The new Croydon Escalation and Resolution Process focusses on ensuring that issues of concern are recorded in CRS in one place. The process is intended to track initial concerns dealt with via informal meetings right through to serious issues of poor practice. Each stage can be reported on which should enable more evidence of thematic issues to be produced during the year. The IRO Manager will monitor the individual cases but also look at trends and patterns in the issues being raised which will be shared with Children Services Management Team – Director and Head of Service as well as with Service Managers.

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. One example of such concern is the Savings process for children and young people and the need for this to be standardised for all children as well as more transparent to them.

The new Quality Assurance Framework agreed with support of colleagues from Merton Achieving for Children for the service includes a requirement for midway monitoring process. IROs are required to complete midway reviews for all children who are looked after. They will complete a review form on each child's file on CRS. Where they are able to obtain all the information they need



from the child's record and there is evidence that the plan is progressing this will be done as a file review. The social worker and team manager will be notified that this has taken place. Where it is not possible to do this they will arrange to meet with the social worker and team manager to complete the midway review. Depending on the outcome of the midway review the CP chair or IRO may either take no further action, will agree a new work plan with the social worker/manager or implement the CERP process.

The QA service managers will provide a quarterly report on the findings of the midway reviews to Children Services Management Team and will make recommendations for practice improvements across the services.

**Evidence of IRO activity and effectiveness:**

What are we doing about it?

- Revision of Croydon Escalation and Resolution Policy
- Reports on informal and formal challenge by IROs monitored by IRO Manager
- Introduction of formal mid-way monitoring process for IROs as part of the new Quality Assurance Framework.

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

### **Tackling drift and delay:**

A key role for the IRO is ensuring that plans for children are not subject to unnecessary drift and delay. We are tackling this in our work plan by increasing the scrutiny opportunities for the IRO team in the coming year.

The new Croydon Escalation Policy coupled with a re- launched Permanency Planning Process and training offer to all teams will result in an increase in intelligence and understanding of the factors which result in delay and actions we can take to deal with the issues.

### **Complaints and Compliments:**

The Complaints leaflet for children and young people has been overhauled as part of the Improvement Plan with involvement from the IRO service. The intention is for the service to be active in promoting the new leaflet both as a hard copy and online for all the children they review this year. Links between the complaints team and the IRO Team Manager have been made. The intention is for the manager to be aware of any themes of complaints in the LAC service. This will enable the service to ensure relevant issues are raised with the IROs on cases where complaints have been made. The precise mechanism for this process will be developed during the next year. We have been encouraging IROs to recognise and promote good practice where they see it. An IRO has recently highlighted a social worker's dedication to a young person over time and ensured her manager was aware of this.

### **Independent Visitor Service:**

This internal service was recognised by the OFSTED inspection as offering a valuable outlet for children and young people in Croydon. The Inspectors were concerned to learn that there were children who wanted to have the service but were waiting to be allocated a visitor. As a result an expansion to the service has been agreed and an additional coordinator has now been appointed with the intention that the number of volunteers recruited and trained will increase this year and more children and young people can be matched up with a volunteer. The co-ordinators now record key events relating to the relationship on CRS so that IROs and Social Workers are aware of the service. The service also offers opportunities for Independent Visitors and the children and young people they are matched with to meet together. These events take place at least twice a year and are really positively viewed by the children and young people.

## **10. Annual work programme for April 2018- March 2019**

### **THEME ONE: Achieve good outcomes 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Monitor themes of the issues escalated by IROs to aid service planning.
- 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.
- 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.

## 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.
- Monitor completion of outcomes by IROs and identify early any issues of delay.
- Continue the focus on completion of pre-meeting reports by social work teams in collaboration with Service Managers across the service.
- 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.