



**Corporate Parenting Committee**  
3 November 2015

**Report from the Strategic  
Director of Children and Young People**

**Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report  
2014/15**

**1. Summary**

The purpose of this report is to provide the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee with the Annual Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report for 2014/15 as required by statutory regulations. The report provides both quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Services in Brent.

**2. Recommendations**

The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review, comment on and question the contents of this report. This is to provide evidence that the management of the service is being monitored and challenged in order to promote good outcomes for children.

**3. Purpose of service and legal context**

The Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO) service is set within the framework from the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance (2011). The regulations set out the requirement for an independent review of the circumstances and plans for all looked after children, within 28 days of becoming accommodated (first review), within three months of the first review and at a period not to exceed six months thereafter. There is also an expectation that a review is convened when the plan for that child changes substantially. The IRO service in Brent is provided by an external provider, Aidhour.

- 3.1** The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the looked after children's (LAC) review process, to a wider overview of cases including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children looked after and for challenging drift and delay.

- 3.2** The importance of the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer is captured in the foreword of the research conducted by the National Children's Bureau in 2011, written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson.

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

#### **4. Review of 2014/15 workplan**

The priorities for the IRO service in 2014 /15 were;

Improve the quality of the service to LAC through closer monitoring and contract management of Aidhour IROs. A quarterly contract monitoring meeting will take place with the IRO manager.

*The quarterly meeting has been taking place regularly during 2014/15. The meetings are primarily held to trouble shoot practical issues, offer training and look at areas which have led to escalations to try to reduce reoccurrence by addressing the initial reason.*

- 4.1** The IRO group including permanent and Aidhour IROs will meet together bi-annually to discuss developments in the area of their work and be further updated on Children's Social Care in Brent.

*Aidhour IROs met twice, the first with Brent's Principal Lawyer who focused on the national and local drivers, such as the public law outline that influence care planning practice and the second meeting with the Operational Director and the Strategic Director for Children Services, to ensure integration into the organisation. IROs are independent of the management structure for looked after children although they need to be confident to escalate concerns to the DCS if necessary.*

- 4.2** An annual IRO service meeting will take place to include the Strategic and Operational Directors to review progress.

*This has taken place and is an annual event at which the DCS and the OD can hear about the work of the IROs directly and learn what is working well and what needs to change. Meetings provide an important opportunity for IROs to hear about the vision for the service and the aspirations for Brent's looked after young people. In addition the themes emerging from the IROs work influences service planning and practice.*

- 4.3** Practice will be further improved by the IRO manager observing practice of the in-house and Aid hour IROs. Feedback will be given to individual IROs and themes will be developed for discussion at the bi annual meeting.

*Observation of IROs was undertaken by the IRO manager and Director of Aid hour with feedback given to IROs directly afterwards. The observation and feedback from professionals taking part in Reviews is positive. Most comments noted that IROs are very experienced and child focused, able to challenge and take up issues with the Local Authority where this is required.*

- 4.4** Children will be supported to write and present an annual report about their experiences of being in care in Brent.

*This has not been implemented but a report will be produced in the 2015/16 period*

- 4.5** The induction programme for new social workers includes an introduction to the IRO service in Brent so that they are clear about the process and the resolution arrangements for escalations.

*The IRO manager has been attending induction meetings with social workers to support them to understand all the relevant processes and arrangements.*

- 4.6** Develop a child friendly guide called, "Your IRO" with LAC that can be included as part of the 'coming into care pack'

*A pack has now been developed in liaison with children and young people in care and is handed to the child / young person by the IRO at their first review.*

- 4.7** Develop a tracking system for children who have a permanency plan of adoption, so that the reviewing process promotes swift progress towards a child's final placement.

*The IRO manager attends the Tracking Panel chaired by the Head of Service for Fostering and Adoption and liaises with IROs following meetings to progress any necessary actions. Over the last financial year nine children were placed for adoption and 12 children were subjects of an Adoption Order*

- 4.8** Successful tendering and re-commissioning of the IRO service.

*The IRO service was successfully re-commissioned in April 2015, in line with the council's procurement and tendering procedure.*

- 4.9** Increase parental participation in children's reviews by producing a 'guide to your child's review' and promote the use of an advocate if deemed necessary.

*This has been partially Implemented. All the children who have requested an advocate or where an advocate was recommended by an IRO had an advocate provided. In total 42 children were provided with an advocate representing 13% of the LAC population, however this still remains low compared to other local authorities' figures and is an area requiring further development.*

*Parental inclusion and participation in Brent are usual practice in LAC reviews. Where parents are not able to attend reviews at the child's placement, IROs would see them either in the office or at a mutually agreed venue.*

## **5. Professional Profile of the IRO Service**

The IRO Service sits within Brent Children's Social Care Safeguarding Service. The service's core function is reviewing plans for (looked after children) children in care and monitoring the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding responsibilities.

- 5.1** In 2014/15 Brent directly employed one full time IRO and an IRO Manager both with several years experience. The remainder of the reviewing officers are freelance, experienced social work practitioners contracted through an independent agency, Aidhour Ltd (a not-for-profit company established 1998). All of the IROs are DBS checked (Disclosure and Barring Service), HCPC registered (Health Care Professional Council) fully qualified (above the minimum requirements) and experienced. Many of the IROs have been undertaking reviews for Brent for a number of years and know the children well. In some instances, the IROs have been the most consistent and trusted person in the child's life apart from their carers.

## **6. Referral and allocations**

The IRO service is supported by business support officers who process invoices, liaise with Aidhour and allocated social workers and complete other administrative work as necessary.

- 6.1** Referrals to Aidhour are completed via the Director of Aidhour who ensures children are promptly allocated to an Aidhour IRO, promoting smooth communication and liaison with allocated social workers and the LAC review team.
- 6.2** Full time IROs carry a case load of 60 – 65 children at any given time. This case load is in line with national guidance and Ofsted recommendations. IROs are valued by social work staff as experts in the field of LAC and as such offer guidance on care planning, as well as tracking individual plans through regular mid-way reviews.
- 6.3** Once allocated, IROs are expected to provide and maintain continuity and consistency in reviewing a particular child's care plan whilst they remain looked after. In addition, the IROs complete the midway reviews and liaise with the Child's Guardian if there are court procedures and other professionals, as and when required. This promotes a joined up approach in order to achieve the agreed care plan for the child and ensure that the required standard is maintained. In addition to Brent's internal quality assurance systems Aidhour Ltd also monitors the work of their IROs to ensure it is undertaken in line with the care planning regulations to agreed standards and deadlines.

## 7. Quality assurance and monitoring of the IRO service

The Head of Safeguarding and the IRO manager in Brent oversee the work of the Aidhour IROs through contract monitoring, audits, meetings and direct observation of their work by the IRO manager.

- 7.1** Contract meetings take place once a quarter and are attended by the Director of Aidhour, the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and the IRO manager. Agenda items for this meeting include the consideration of practice issues arising through the period and examination of potential future developments. The agenda is agreed prior to the meeting. During 2014/15 these meetings took place on 03/07/14, 22/10/14 and 19/01/15.
- 7.2** An annual meeting with the Strategic Director for Children and Young People attended by all the IROs took place on 22/10/14. At this meeting IROs raised a number of issues including the impact of the turnover of social work staff. Brent IROs were updated of the robust plan Brent has in place to address this through a recruitment and retention programme. Though the challenge continues to be present, the turnover of social work staff has reduced with the proportion of permanent staff increasing. Social workers also have reduced case loads and closer supervision and support. IROs have direct access to the Operational Director of Children's Social Care and the Strategic Director of Children and Young People to raise issues in respect of LAC children, should they require it.
- 7.3** IROs carrying out review tasks have secure remote access to Brent 'Mosaic', the integrated children's service database so that they can input their reports and review the progress of a child's care plan. They are able to add a case note to a child's case record on Mosaic, record the midway review of care plans and identify any relevant issues that require escalation to senior managers for resolution.
- 7.4** IROs have secure remote access to the Brent internal e-mail system which facilitates confidential communication and information exchange between IROs and Brent social workers and managers, thus complying with data protection requirements.
- 7.5** The team has remained stable with only one change in staffing in the last 12 months. This has led to continuity of IRO input and stability for many of the LAC.
- 7.6** In terms of diversity there is a mix of IROs within both the Permanent and Aidhour IRO provision. The team of IROs, including those permanent and from Aidhour comprised 7 (44%) males and 9 (56%) females. Of the children looked after on the same date 137 (42%) female and 189 (58%) male. Over the same period at the end of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, 155 (45%) were female and 193 (55%) were male.

The ethnic make up of the IROs is less diverse than that of the looked after population.

IRO Ethnicity	
White	14
Mixed	0
Asian or Asian British	1
Black or Black British	1

**7.7** While it is noted that the ethnic composition of the IROs is not fully representative of the borough's LAC population, services are provided within an equal opportunities framework and all IROs, as qualified social workers, are expected to adhere to the Health and Care Professional Council code of conduct and Brent's internal policies and procedures.

**7.8** The IRO service in Brent has embedded in its practice, protocols for CAFCASS and Independent Reviewing Officer and Good Practice for Public Law Work. This has helped to ensure cases in proceedings are subject to robust analysis and challenge about the matters of critical importance to the child's safety, wellbeing and permanency. The IRO manager is part of Brent's permanency tracking panel and attends the West London Court Users Group and London IRO managers' meeting which is held every quarter at the Department for Education (DfE). This ensures the service stays in touch with developments across the sector, in respect of recent court judgements and meeting the expectations of the court in care planning cases in proceedings. The DfE meetings look at local and national issues affecting LAC.

## **8. Re tendering of the IRO service**

The IRO contract was re-procured at the end of 2014 as the contract was due to expire on 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2015. Following Brent's tendering and procurement procedure, Aidhour was chosen as the preferred provider and awarded the contract for a further two years, with the option to extend for a third year.

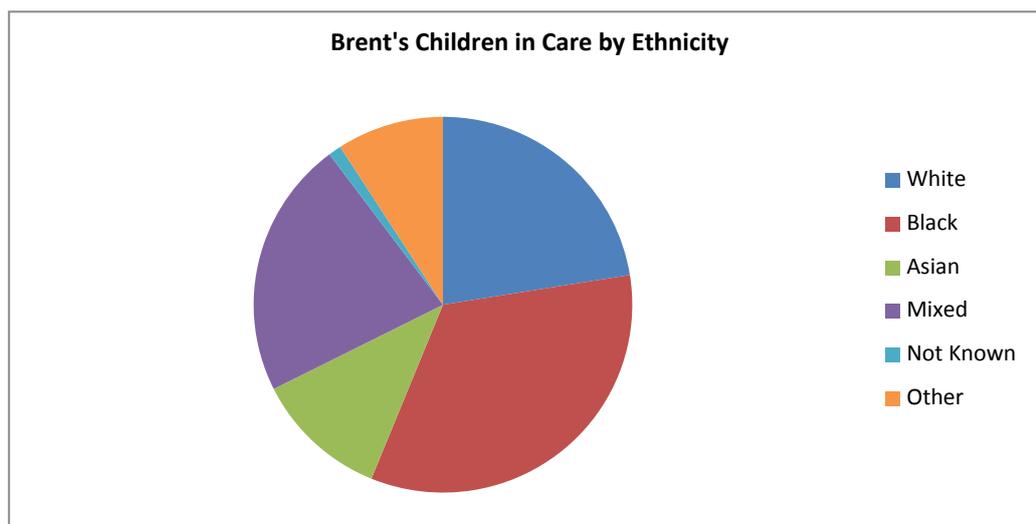
**8.1** The outcome of this award, to the same provider, has resulted in less disruption for children and young people as they continue to have the same IRO. Some of the Aidhour IROs have known the children for over 10 years and are in many cases the most consistent person in the children and young people's life.

## **9. Quantitative information - Looked After population and the IRO service**

- The Looked After population at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015 was 326.
- A total of 929 reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015.
- Fourteen looked after children have disabilities.
- The overwhelming majority of children and young people aged 4 years plus (606 reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves.
- On a month by month basis the majority of Reviews are held within the appropriate time scales.

**9.1** The ethnic identity of the cohort of children looked after as of 31 March 2015 was as follows:

<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White	93	28.5%
Mixed	53	16.2%
Asian or Asian British	51	15.6%
Black or Black British	116	35.5%
Other	13	4.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>326</b>	<b>100%</b>



<b>Children in Care by Age and Gender</b>		
	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Under 1</b>	6	7
<b>0-4</b>	9	13
<b>5-9 years</b>	29	25
<b>10-15</b>	75	51
<b>16 - 17</b>	70	41
<b>Total</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>137</b>

The age profile of children and young people at 31st March 2015:

- 4% of children who were looked after during the year ending 31st March 2015 were aged less than one year old
- 6.7 % of children who were looked after were aged 1-4.
- 16% of young people who were looked after were aged 5-9.
- 38.6 % of young people who were looked after were aged 10-15.
- 34.4 % of young people who were looked after were 16-17.

**9.2** During 2014/15 the IRO manager has assumed a number of other responsibilities including participation in the induction of new staff, supervision and support for newly qualified social workers, related work activities with teams and attendance at regional and national meetings and events.

## 10. Participation of children

It is always preferable that children attend their review meetings and give their views. However, there are some children with special needs, who may have autism or behavioural problems who cannot easily manage disruption to their daily routine or sitting in a meeting discussing their Care Plan, therefore such a forum is inappropriate. IROs are sensitive to these children's needs and work with the allocated social worker and carer to listen to a child's views, wishes and feelings in a way more suited to them and incorporate this into their care plan.

## 11. Attendance at Reviews

Reviews offer an important opportunity for children to have their say about their care plans and for professionals and carers to listen and take children views into account. IROs encourage children to attend their reviews. If a child does not want to attend his/her review he/she can participate in a number of other ways. Participation types are recorded against the following heading listed in the chart below.

<b>Type of participation</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>% of total LAC</b>
Child aged under 4 at the time of the review	117	26.2%
Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself	606	65.2%
Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf	5	0.5%
Child attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally)	1	0.1%
Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	7	0.75%
Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her	160	17.2
Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	18	1.9%
Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	15	1.6%

	<b>1</b>	<b>0.1</b>
	<b>930</b>	<b>100%</b>

- 11.1** The overwhelming majority of children and young people aged four years plus (606 reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves, in comparison to 2013 /14 when this figure was 593.

The increase in children's participation has been a result of greater focus and activity by the IROs and the social workers to ensure that the child's voice is heard and that reviews are held at a time and place to facilitate the greatest opportunity for attendance.

## **12. Permanency Outcomes**

During 2014/15, the largest number of children have achieved permanency through returning home to their parents or a family member, with the second highest number of children settled in a permanency arrangement in foster care.

## **13. Advocacy Service**

IROs routinely check that children and young people know about advocacy and how it can support them in having a real say in decisions affecting their lives. They also check at each review whether an independent visitor is needed, and if there are any communication needs requiring additional or specialist support.

- 13.1** The Advocacy Service for LAC is provided through a contract with Aidhour and commissioned on an individual basis when required.

The total number referred to advocacy was 42 representing 13% of the Looked after Children population.

The broad profile of children referred for advocacy as of 31st March 2015 included,

- Children with a registered disability
- Unaccompanied asylum seekers
- Children whose first language is not English
- Children in secure accommodation
- Children placed at a distance from their home address.

The majority of advocacy requests related to young people's concerns in the following areas:

- Entitlement to pocket money and other funds for activities
- Choice of placements and wanting a certain type of location or placement.
- Contact with family members
- Reviewing a secure accommodation order

Children placed in secure accommodation for their own safety under s25 of the Children Act 1989, are always provided with an advocate as a matter of course. This ensures that their views are transmitted to each review to consider if they should be immediately released.

#### **14. Timeliness of reviews**

In 2014/15 95.5% of Looked after Reviews took place within the statutory timescales. IROs completed some reviews in a series of meetings to ensure the relevant people were involved and the meeting remained child focused and friendly.

A small proportion did not take place within the required timescale for the following reasons:

- IRO being ill on the day of a review.
- Late notification by allocated social workers.
- Unplanned change of placement on the day of the review.

As a result of the number of late notifications for reviews, a new process has been put in place to ensure that social workers notify the IRO manager immediately when a child becomes looked after to prevent further occurrences.

#### **15. Quality of Care Planning**

IROs continue to monitor the quality of care plans. IROs report that most children have a child friendly care plan, written in a clear and coherent manner. Children and young people can expect to contribute to their care plan and receive their own copy. IROs routinely check the care planning process has helped children and young people to have their say on matters important to them and help them to understand what is happening and why.

#### **16. Progress-chasing activities between Looked after Reviews**

IROs routinely contact social workers for updates on the progress of LAC review decisions. This is mid-way through the review by visiting or phoning the young person. All looked after children and young people are given a child friendly leaflet entitled 'My Independent Reviewing Officer' at their initial review. The leaflet has details of their IROs name, contact number and email address. Young people often contact their IROs directly to discuss issues worrying them.

#### **17. Management oversight of Care Plans**

The revised statutory guidance states that operational social work managers must consider the decisions from the Review before they are finalised. This is due in part to the need to ensure any resource implications have been addressed. Once the decisions are reached the manager has five days to raise any queries or objections. However instances of this are rare, which indicates that managers are generally satisfied with the recommendations and decisions at reviews.

**17.1** IROs have continued to monitor the quality of social work reports to ensure these meet the expected standard with most attention paid to the child's progress in physical health, emotional wellbeing, school life and academic attainment, permanency and identity needs. However social workers do not routinely provide pathway plans to review meetings and this is an area that requires further action.

#### **18. Children's views about their IRO and their review process**

Overall, the experience reported by children of their IROs continues to be positive. Children and young people have told us that they appreciate the consistent approach of IROs, their independence and availability. The following examples are taken from the feedback from children and young people to their reviews:

**I would like to see my family every day!**

My social worker is great!

I can not Waite to go back home and my IRO is helping me!

My IRO sorted my Lap top!

I would like to become a publicist!

My IRO is like the brother I never had!

My IRO knew me since I was three, he saw me going through primary and secondary, now I am 18, can he stay in contact with me?

## **19. Quality Assurance of the IRO Service**

### Auditing and observations undertaken by the IRO Manager

Audit and observation of reviews are undertaken by the IRO manager and Director of Aidhour. Each IRO has been observed once during the year and a number of audits were completed on the quality of review minutes and mid way reviews.

- 19.1** Overall the quality of the minutes and how IROs chair and approach LAC reviews is assessed to be good. However mid way reviews did not appear on every file audited and this is an area that requires improvement. In addition IROs do not always upload their email correspondence with social workers routinely and one

particular IRO has had difficulty in accessing Mosaic. This is being rectified through the Brent IT service.

## **20. Escalations and conflict resolution**

One of the key functions of the IRO is to identify and resolve problems arising from the care planning process. In Brent this is called the Looked after Children Escalation Management Process.

- 20.1** The IRO will, in the first instance, seek to resolve the issue informally with the social worker and the social worker's manager. If this is unsuccessful the IRO escalates this to the Team Manager and Principal Officer.
- 20.2** If the issue is not resolved by the Team Manager or Principal Officer the IRO will escalate further to the Head of Service.
- 20.3** Information elicited from the issues identified in escalation is used to target support and challenge practice to make improvements. Young people have reported that they feel supported when IROs raise concerns and alerts about practice or plans.

A total of 65 escalations were initiated by IROs in 2014/15.

Among the 65 case escalations raised by IROs the majority were resolved at the SW/Team Manager and Principal Officer level and include the following areas:

- Frequent change of social workers
- Drift and delay including policy and procedures not being followed
- Paperwork incomplete
- Statutory duties not fulfilled (Health Assessments, visits, etc.)
- Education issues, including delay in securing a school place.
- Lack of management oversight
- Transition to semi independent units
- IROs were not consulted on a change of care plan

- 20.4** One case was escalated to the Operational Director and one to the Strategic Director in 2014/15. In both instances the issues were resolved through their intervention. Under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 the IRO has the authority to refer the case of any looked after child to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) if they are of the view that the child's human rights have been breached. In 2014/2015 there were no referrals made to CAFCASS by IROs in Brent.
- 20.5** The use of the escalation and dispute resolution protocol often proved successful in negotiating a positive outcome. An example of this was when a young person was unhappy about a proposed move and this was resolved through the intervention of her IRO.
- 20.6** The consultation forms were replaced with more interactive, child friendly and colourful forms. These forms were devised in consultation with children and young

people and have been implemented.

## **21. Areas for Development in 2015/16**

Since the service moved into the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance service, further developments have been identified to ensure the IROs continue to undertake their role in a way that promotes positive impacts and continuous improvements in the lives and plans of Brent's LAC. These developments are led by the IRO manager and Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and monitored as part of the contracting arrangements with Aidhour.

### **21.1 Planned improvements for 2015/16 are as follows:**

- Closer monitoring of timescales and midway reviews.
- Incorporating the Signs of Safety model into the review process.
- The IRO group, including permanent and Aidhour IROs, will continue to meet together bi-annually to discuss developments in the area of their work and be further updated in Children's Social Care in Brent
- Revise the current review meeting template in partnership with the Children in Care council
- Increase the gathering of children's feedback to improve the quality and responsiveness of the service and individual reviews
- The IRO manager continues to observe reviews of the in-house and Aidhour IROs. Any feedback themes will be discussed at the bi annual meeting to support IRO development
- Children to be supported to write and present an annual report about their experiences of being in care in Brent
- Investigate further opportunities to strengthening the tracking system for children who have an adoption decision, so that the reviewing process supports swift action towards a child's final placement
- Increase parental participation in children's reviews by producing a 'guide to your child's review' and promote understanding and the use of an advocate for parents where necessary.
- Continuous learning from feedback from children and young people; parents, professionals and carers incorporated into the Learning and Development offer.

## **Appendices**

N/A

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