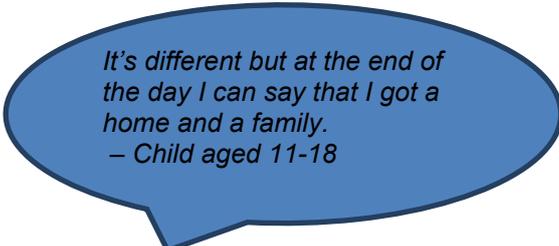


**Brent Council Children and Young People  
Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report**

**Period of review: 01/04/16 to 31/03/17**

This report outlines the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) on quality assuring and improving services for children in care. It also contains quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO provision in Brent as required by statutory guidance. This report includes quotations gathered from a 'Bright Spots' survey carried out with looked after children and through consultation with the Care in Action, Brent's Children in Care Council.



*It's different but at the end of the day I can say that I got a home and a family.  
– Child aged 11-18*

## **1. Summary of Key Messages**

### **What has gone well?**

- Children and young people feel they are involved in decision making about their lives. In a survey conducted with 96 children in care, 90% of respondents aged 8-11 and 84% of respondents aged 12 to 18 said they felt included in decision making 'always' or 'sometimes'.
- A total of 76% of looked after children who responded said that an adult had explained to them why they are in care.
- When children were asked about whether they thought their lives were getting better, 77% of children aged 8-18 said their lives were 'a bit better' or 'much better'.
- Children have said that they value keeping the same IRO throughout their time in care.
- When children ask their IROs for support, there is evidence that issues are raised by IROs and resolved quickly avoiding escalation.

### **What can be improved?**

- There continues to be a high number of changes in social workers for children. 66 children aged 11-18 responded to a question about how many social workers they had in the last year and 47% said they had three or more social workers.
- IROs need to become more involved in the scrutiny of Pathway Plans and preparation for independent living to prepare children for leaving care.
- Some IROs have fed back that they are not always consulted when children move. It is important for IROs to be involved when there are any changes to a child's care plan.
- Social workers' reports and updated care plan are not always available before the review. This does not allow the child, carers, parents and the IRO time to fully prepare for the review.
- There needs to be closer monitoring of the timeliness of LAC reviews to improve performance.



*My IRO listens and helped me to move with a better foster carer, I am now very happy.*

## 2. Purpose of the IRO Service

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) provision in Brent is set within the national framework from the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the looked after children's review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for looked after children and challenging drift and delay.

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 2014 that states: "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." The IRO service in Brent is committed to high standards of care planning for Brent's looked after children.

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### *Case Study: Aasif*

*Aasif is a 14 year old unaccompanied child who was placed with an independent foster carer when he arrived in Brent. When Aasif's case responsibility changed to another local authority as part of the national dispersal scheme, Aasif was worried that he would need to move and told his IRO he wanted to stay with his foster carer. The IRO worked persistently with the new local authority to ensure Aasif remained with his foster carer where he is settled and happy.*

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## 3. Review of IRO provision priority actions

The IRO provision had 7 priorities to improve services and make an impact on positive outcomes for looked after children in 2016/17.

**Priority 1: Closer monitoring of timescales for midway reviews and distribution of LAC review minutes to ensure plans for children are made and enacted within the agreed time scale for the child.**

A sample of 25 case audits was completed which evidenced that there is an increasing number of midway reviews completed. This is not yet consistent across all cases and is an area requiring continued monitoring.

LAC review minutes are routinely distributed to relevant parties by social workers. Audit has identified some improvement in timeliness of distribution but more improvement is required in this area. Work is underway to identify resources through the Department administration review to support more effective coordination of reviews.

**Priority 2: Incorporate and implement the Signs of Safety model to the review process to keep the long-term safety and welfare of children and young people at the heart of the review and build on family and carers' strengths.**

All 11 IROs who conduct LAC Reviews for Brent are now trained with the Signs of Safety model. The feedback from IROs on using the model with LAC reviews varies. Although some find it useful when there are risks involved, including a risk of a placement breakdown, the benefits are less evident when children and young people are settled, stable and achieving. As a result of this feedback, a review will take place to determine how Signs of Safety can be better adapted to LAC Reviews and care planning.

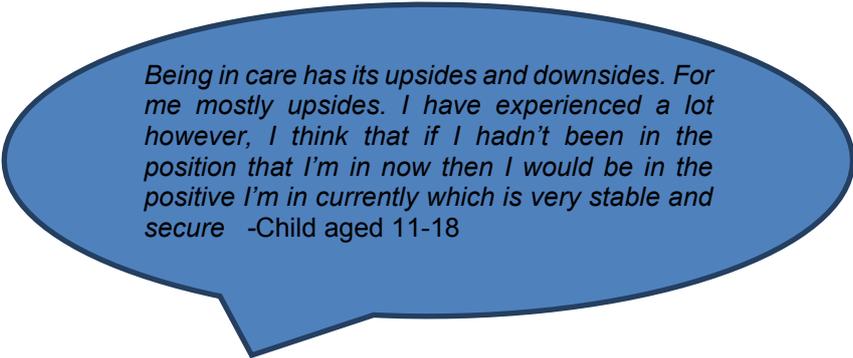
**Priority 3: The IRO Group including permanent and Aidhour IROs to continue to meet together bi-annually to progress development in the area of their work and be further updated in about services for children in care in Brent**

The IROs met twice in July 2016 and January 2017. IROs were updated of the direction and development of Brent by the Strategic Director and the two Operational Directors. This was also used as an opportunity to raise any issues the IROs may have. IROs are aware of Brent's escalation procedure and have direct access to the Strategic Director and the Operational Directors should the need arise. IROs can also seek independent legal advice when required and are supported by Brent legal services in pursuing this.

**Priority 4: Increase the gathering of children's feedback to improve the quality and responsiveness of the service and individual reviews and ensure we adhere to the principle of 'nothing with us, without us'.**

The Review, Engagement and Participation (REP) Team Manager regularly attends Care in Action, Brent's Children in Care Council events and uses these opportunities to gather feedback on the IRO function. Feedback is summarised in this report.

In early 2017, CYP worked with the Bright Spots programme, a partnership with the University of Bristol and Coram Voice, that aims to improve the experience of care for looked after children, give children a voice on their own well-being and highlight the 'bright spots' of practice. The REP Team coordinated a survey in close collaboration with Care in Action that led to 96 children and young people responding to age appropriate questions relating to relationships, resilience, rights, recovery and well-being. Planning is underway to fully disseminate the findings and incorporate these findings into service improvement activities.



*Being in care has its upsides and downsides. For me mostly upsides. I have experienced a lot however, I think that if I hadn't been in the position that I'm in now then I would be in the positive I'm in currently which is very stable and secure -Child aged 11-18*

**Priority 5: Recruit a permanent IRO to the vacant position to increase the capacity of the service**

A permanent IRO was appointed in September 2016 and is integrated into the service.

**Priority 6: The IRO manager to observe reviews of the in-house and Aidhour IROs using the EARS and Appreciative Inquiry Signs of Safety model to reflect learning back. Any feedback themes will be discussed at the bi annual meeting to support IRO development**

Eight observations of reviews for looked after children were undertaken. Overall IROs demonstrated a high level of understanding of the review process ensuring that the child's voice is at the centre of decision making. In all the observations IROs spoke to children on their own and took their views on board. As a result of the observation, a Signs of Safety refresher was arranged for all IROs and this took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> Jan 2017.

**Priority 7: Continuous learning from feedback from children and young people; parents, professionals and carers will be fully incorporated into the Learning and Development offer.**

The REP Team Manager regularly visits LAC and Permanency Teams to share learning about how services can be improved. Over the last year, this has focussed on looking at care planning from the child's perspective, making sure reviews are child focussed and the importance of sharing the care plan in advance of the review. As a service improvement initiative, Care in Action delivered training to foster carers on the importance of placement stability from a child's perspective.

The CYP training offer for social workers in 2017/18 includes two sessions on 'Effective Placements and Care Planning' alongside other topics of relevance to social workers working with looked after children.

#### **4. Professional Profile of the IROs**

The IRO function is part of the Review, Engagement and Participation (REP) Team that sits within the CYP Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. The REP Team includes IRO functions, the Participation Officer for looked after children and Youth Engagement Officer who is responsible for Brent Youth Parliament. The core functions of IROs are reviewing care plans for looked after children and monitoring the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding responsibilities. As a whole, the REP Team promotes participation and hearing children's voices across CYP and ensures children's voices are incorporated into service improvement initiatives.

The REP Team is managed by an experienced social worker who is able to undertake reviews when necessary. Brent has directly employed one full time IRO since September 2016. The remainder of the IROs are experienced social work practitioners contracted through an independent agency, Aidhour (a not-for-profit company established 1998). All IROs are Disclosure and Barring Service checked, Health Care Professional Council

registered and fully qualified (above the minimum requirements). 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. The IRO contract with Aidhour was extended to 31 March 2018 and a review is being undertaken to plan for the future of the service.

IRO provision has remained stable overall; however, two IROs have left Aidhour in the last 12 months for personal reasons. This overall high level of retention of IROs has led to continuity of IRO input and stability for many of our looked after children.

There are 11 IROs in Brent including those permanent and from Aidhour. There is a good representation of male and female IROs, including 6 males (54.5%) and 5 females (45.5%). This is similar to our looked after children population on 31 March 2017 where there were 206 (65%) male and 113 (35%) female children in care.

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

IRO Ethnicity	Number
White	6
Mixed	1
Asian or Asian British	1
Black or Black British	3

While it is noted that the ethnic composition of the IROs is not fully representative of the borough's looked after children 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.

## 5. Profile of Brent's looked after children

Although there is a slight increase in children in care in the 0 to 4 age range, 77% of children in care on 31/3/2017 were over the age of 10 and 41% were 16 and 17 years of age.

### Children in care by age

	2015/16	2016/17
0 to 4 years of age	29	33
5 to 9 years of age	56	40
10 to 15 years of age	125	114
16 to 17 years of age	127	132
Total children in care	337	319



There is a significant disproportion of children in care by gender, with males accounting for 65% of Brent's children in care population. This is particularly notable for 16 to 17 year olds in care, where 68% of children in care are male.

*I've been in care most of my life and I feel like I'm getting raised better than I would be with my parents – Child aged 11-18*

**Children in care by age and gender**

	Male	Female
0 to 4 years of age	18	15
5 to 9 years of age	24	16
10 to 15 years of age	74	40
16 to 17 years of age	90	42
Total by gender	206	113

The ethnic identity of the cohort of children looked after as of 31 March 2017 was as follows:

**Children in care by ethnicity**

Ethnicity	Number	%
White	93	29.15%
Mixed/ Multiple	61	19.1%
Asian or Asian British	64	20%
Black or Black British	92	28.8%
Other	9	3.3%
Total	319	100%

*What would make care better?*

*Get my carer more involved in decisions involving school and my life. – Child aged 8-11*

**6. Referral and allocations**

The REP Team Manager is responsible for ensuring children who come into care are allocated an IRO. Referrals to Aidhour are completed via the Aidhour Director who ensures children are promptly allocated to an Aidhour IRO, promoting smooth communication and liaison with allocated social workers and the REP Team. The service is supported by 0.5 post of a business support officer who process invoices, liaises with Aidhour and allocated social workers and completes other administrative work as necessary.

Full time IROs carry a case load of 60 to 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 looked after children and as such offer guidance on care planning, as well as tracking individual plans through mid-way reviews.

Once allocated, IROs are expected to provide and maintain continuity and consistency in reviewing a child's care plan whilst they remain looked after. In addition, the IROs complete midway reviews and liaise with the child's Guardian if there are court procedures as well as other professionals as and when required.

IROs carrying out review tasks have secure remote access to 'Mosaic', Brent's 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.

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. 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.

The REP Team Manager attends London IRO Managers Meetings 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 judgement and meeting the expectations of the court in care planning cases in proceedings. The DfE meetings look at local and national issues affecting looked after children in addition to having a regular slot for a senior manager from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) who makes a presentation on current and relevant issues.

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

The REP Team Manager and Director of Aidhour carry out regular audits looking at the quality of minutes, participation of looked after children in the decision making process, and any drift in the care plan, health or education issues. The audits have revealed clear evidence of IROs taking on board children and young people's views in the decision making process. 100% of the files audits have shown that children are spoken with on their own before their LAC review or on the day of the LAC review. The quality of the minutes is good overall but requires consistency as some minutes did not to cover all the areas required.

The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and the REP Team Manager in Brent oversee the work of the Aidhour IROs through quarterly contract monitoring, audits, meetings and direct observation of their work by the IRO manager. Contract meetings take place once a quarter and are attended by the Director of Aidhour, the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and the REP Team Manager. Agenda items for this meeting include practice and developments. The agenda is agreed prior to the meeting.

The annual meeting between the Strategic Director for Children and Young People and IROs took place on 18/01/17. IROs raised a number of issues including the impact of the turnover of social workers. IROs were updated on the plan Brent has in place to increase the proportion of permanent staff against agency and the setting up of a separate Leaving Care team with additional resource being allocated for this. They were informed that although the challenge of recruiting experienced and permanent social workers continues to be present, the turnover of social work staff has reduced with the proportion of permanent staff increasing. Social workers also have reduced caseloads and closer supervision and support.

*I was happy living with foster mother. I am happy with my social worker. Thanks helping with me.*

- Child aged 11-18

The IRO provision in Brent has a protocol for CAFCASS and Independent Reviewing Officer Good Practice for Public Law Work embedded in practice. 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 to monitor the progress of all children who are looked after for more than 2 months who are not permanently placed.

Overall the quality of the minutes and how IROs chair and approach looked after children reviews is assessed to be good. Mid-way reviews and other activities such as escalations are visible on every file audited with some improvements required with one particular IRO's case file. This has been raised with Aidhour at the quarterly meeting and will continue to be monitored.

In addition to Brent's internal quality assurance systems, Aidhour also monitors the work of IROs to ensure it is undertaken in line with the care planning regulations to agreed standards and deadlines.

## 8.0 Performance information about the IRO service

Performance summary:

- A total of 984 reviews were chaired by IROs 2016/17, a decrease of 6 reviews compared to 2015/16.
- The overwhelming majority of children and young people aged over 4 years (648 reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves.
- On a month by month basis, 91% of Reviews are held within the statutory timescales. This represents a decrease of 5% in comparison to last year. All cases where the review took place late have been audited and an action plan put in place. The reason for the lateness include late referrals and unavoidable last minute cancellations.

### 8.1 Participation of children

It is always preferable that children attend their review meetings and give their views. However, there are some children with additional needs and children who have suffered trauma that may impact on their behaviour who therefore may not be able to participate fully at their review meeting. 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. Children and young people are allowed to say how and who should attend their review.



*It can be fun, but on the downside of living in care, you don't actually have fun with your parents, instead you get carers who are just getting fed info about your life when you know you're not this/that. Whereas your parents knew you since you were born for a limited time gaining more info than the foster carers do. So my point is foster carers (no matter how they are towards you) aren't your real family they are just there to please your life and support you when you need support. – Child aged 11-18*

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**Case study: Adrian**

*Adrian is a 14 year old who entered care due to difficulties in his family life. His relationship with his father wasn't very good and Adrian felt blamed for all the problems in his family. In preparation for Adrian's first LAC Review, the IRO looked at Adrian's journey and discussed the review process with him. The IRO wanted to make sure Adrian could express himself freely and felt it would be best to have a separate meeting with Adrian and with his parents. Although his parents and some professionals were concerned with this decision due to ongoing court proceedings, the IRO strongly advocated for Adrian's voice to be heard in the LAC Review to determine a plan that Adrian would support and work with.*

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**8.2 Attendance and participation 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 their review he/she can participate in a number of other ways. Participation types are recorded against the following heading listed in the chart below.

Type of participation	Number of reviews 2015/16	% 2015/16	Number of reviews 2016/17	% 2016/17
Child physically attends and conveys verbally	677	68%	648	66%
Child does not attend but is represented	154	16%	158	16%
Child age under four	88	9%	109	11%
Child does not attend but conveys through medium such as an advocate	36	4%	32	3.3%
Child does not attend and is not represented	13	1%	22	2.2%
Child attends but does not convey and is not represented	12	1%	10	1%
Child attends and is represented	7	0.7%	3	0.3%
Child attends and conveys symbolically	3	0.3%	2	0.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>990</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>100%</b>

The majority of children and young people aged over four years (648 or 66% of reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves, marking a slight reduction from the previous

year (677 or 68% of reviews). This appears to do be due to a small increase in the number of reviews conducted for children under the age of four and a slight increase in the number of reviews where children did not attend and were not represented.

Children's participation continues to be a strong focus of 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.

### **8.3. Placement moves**

IROs are routinely consulted on placement moves and other significant events or changes to a child's care plan. An audit of escalations shows that IROs have been pro-active in advocating on behalf of young people and preventing moves where this is assessed to be in the young people's interest and their expressed wish. In the majority of the cases there is clear evidence of agencies working collaboratively in partnership.

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#### ***Case study: Moshood***

*Moshood is a 16 year old who is living in semi-independent accommodation. He was well settled and due to start college when another young person moved into the accommodation who he didn't get along with. After a serious incident, the provider proposed that Moshood move. Moshood called his IRO who worked with the social worker to challenge the provider. As a result, the other young person moved out and Moshood remained in his placement. Moshood is happy and attending college as planned.*

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IROs have raised that in a small number of cases they are not consulted in advance of a placement change. The REP Manager is actively working with managers across CYP to ensure IROs are always part of the care planning process.

### **8.4 Health of looked after children**

An audit of a sample of looked after children review minutes has shown that IROs routinely check annual health assessments of looked after children, incorporate the findings within their recommendation and monitor progress. Out of the 20 files audited, it was evident that IROs ensured that the action plans of LAC health assessment were at the forefront of discussions. It was clear that IROs followed up on recommendations around the physical as well as emotional health of children and drew attention to any outstanding tasks. This audit demonstrated that of the cases reviewed, 95% of the actions/recommendations from the most recent health assessment had been followed through within the agreed timescales.

### **8.5 Advocacy Service**

IROs routinely check that children and young people know about advocacy and how it can support them in having a 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.

The advocacy service for looked after children is provided through a contract with Aidhour and commissioned on an individual basis when required. The total number of children referred for advocacy support in 2016/17 was 45 representing 14% of the looked after children population. In addition, 13 children had an independent visitor allocated.

The broad profile of children referred for advocacy as of 31st March 2017 include children with a disability, unaccompanied asylum seekers, children who are unhappy with overall service provision and children in secure accommodation.

The majority of advocacy requests related to children and 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, particularly children wanting an increase in contact.
- Reviewing a secure accommodation order



*I don't want to see Mummy but I would like to see Daddy more.*  
-Child aged 8-11yrs

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.

## 8.6 Timeliness of reviews

In 2016/17 91% of Looked after Reviews took place within the statutory timescales representing a reduction in performance of 5% from 2015/16.

Reasons for the late reviews include the following:

- Late notification by allocated social workers
- An emergency or illness leading to the review being cancelled
- Child or young person not being available on the day due to emergency.
- Miscalculation of dates (a number of reviews were out of timescale by 1 day)

An audit of the late reviews has also highlighted that the majority of the reviews out of timescale are allocated to a particular IRO. An appropriate action has been taken to address this and monthly monitoring systems put in place.

## 8.7 Quality of Care Planning

One of the IROs primary function is 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 are supported 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.

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### *Case Study: Cristina*

*Cristina is a 16 year old who entered care at the age of 6 and has had the same IRO throughout her time in care. Her IRO actively ensured that Cristina was matched with a long-term foster carer who has helped her have stable care. Cristina describes her IRO “the one consistent person who has helped me grow mature and is always there when I need him”. Cristina is expected to achieve good GCSEs and has ambitions to attend a Russell Group university.*

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## **8.8 Progress between reviews**

IROs routinely contact social workers for updates on the progress of looked after children review decisions. This is conducted mid-way through the review period 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 IRO’s name, contact number and email address. Young people often contact their IROs directly to discuss issues worrying them. Children have reported they would like the number of their IRO directly so they can contact them more easily when they wish.

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### *Case Study: Abdul*

*Abdul is an unaccompanied minor who did not speak any English when he arrived in the United Kingdom. He said he was very scared to go out of the unit, attend college or socialise. Abdul’s allocated IRO spoke his mother tongue, which created an instant connection. Following the first review, the IRO met Abdul for coffee and encouraged him to register at college and get in touch with a local church football club. Abdul is now in college and describes his IRO as his ‘second Dad’ who has always responded when he needed him.*

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## **8.9 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. Instances of this are rare, which indicates that managers are overall satisfied with the recommendations and decisions at reviews.

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.

IROs and children and young people have given feedback to indicate that sometimes they are not consulted when decisions are made about a move of placement. This is a significant change in the life of a child or young person and this is an area where guidance and training for staff involved may be helpful.

IROs have fed back an area for development is clarity around young people moving to adulthood as social workers do not routinely provide Pathway Plans to reviews in the timescale the young person needs. Pathway Plans should be developed with young people from the age of 15.5. This is an area that requires further action.

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### *Case Study: Karim*

*Karim is a 17 year old who lives in semi-independent accommodation to prepare for adulthood. He has a good rapport with his IRO who has been a consistent person in his life. At Karim's last review a decision was reached for Karim to move, but only if he viewed the new accommodation and was happy with it. Karim called his IRO to say he wasn't happy, but felt pressurised to move. The IRO escalated the matter and ensured Karim had advocacy support to plan any transition.*

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## **8.10 Permanency Outcomes**

During 2016/17, the majority 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. In order to monitor the high number of children who are looked after over the age of 13 and to monitor permanency, a Permanency Tracking Panel has been established and is chaired by the Head of Looked After Children and Permanency. The REP Team Manager attends and contributes to this panel and ensures information sharing when needed between the panel and IROs

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

Overall the experience reported by children of their IROs continues to be positive. The REP Team Manager regularly attends Care in Action, Brent's Children in Care Council. Children and young people state that they appreciate the consistent approach of IROs alongside their independence and availability. Children and young people have also said that their IROs listen to their concerns and take up issues with the relevant services where this is needed and that the issues are often resolved quickly. In the Bright Spots survey, 90 % of Children age 8-11 and 84% of young people age 11-18 who took part reported that they felt included in decision making.

Children and young people say that they experience frequent change of social workers. In some cases children and young people have also experienced change of placement without proper consultation or not having the opportunity to view the proposed placement beforehand, reinforcing the importance of IROs being informed of any placement move to promote good transitions. Children and young people said that they value the consultation

forms given before the review but most appreciate being seen and spoken with on their own.

The following examples are taken from the feedback from children and young people to their reviews:



## 10. 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. 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. If the issue is not resolved by the Team Manager or Principal Officer the IRO will escalate further to the Head of Service.

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 50 escalations were initiated by IROs in 2016/17 compared to 58 escalations in 2015/16.

Among the 50 case escalations raised by IROs the majority were resolved at the social worker, Team Manager, Principal Officer and Head of Service levels. One situation reached the Operational Director level. Issues raised include the following areas:

- Frequent change of social workers, including one child who had a different social worker at every review.
- Care plans not progressing in a timely way, including policy and procedures not being followed around staying put and savings and recommendations of previous reviews not being carried out.

- Care plan and review paperwork being incomplete including Pathway Plans.
- Education issues, including delay in securing a school place for unaccompanied minors and completion of PEP for 16-18 year olds by sixth form colleges.
- Transition to semi-independent units and the completion of housing vulnerability reports.
- IROs not being consulted on a change of placement and care plan.
- Request for respite to prevent placement breakdown.

The use of the escalation management process often proved successful in negotiating a positive outcome.

## 11. Impact and outcomes

The IRO service has contributed in bringing positive outcomes in the following areas:

- Stability and choice of placements and avoiding frequent moves. IROs have supported the outcome of increased permanency for children, in particular Special Guardianship Orders and long-term fostering.
- Young people given more control to decide and lead their looked after children review, contributing to feedback from children that they feel they are involved in decisions.
- Improved timeliness of progression of care plans through a strengthened challenge function and embedding the escalation management process.
- The IRO Service has worked with social workers and the Virtual School to support young people to continue in education post 18 with a number of care leavers applying to attend (Further education) FE colleges and universities.

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### *Case Study: Shannon and Ciara*

*Shannon and Ciara are 10 and 11 year old sisters who were placed with a foster carer outside of Brent when they entered care. Their IRO met them before the review and they said they were really unhappy. The IRO was concerned about what they told him and immediately escalated this, leading to Shannon and Ciara moving to live with a new foster carer. At the last LAC Review they told their IRO that they are happy and want to stay with their new foster carer forever.*

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## 12. What the REP Team plans to do in 2017/18

The REP Team joining together the IRO functions alongside engagement and participation has brought an increased opportunity to ensure that the child's voice becomes central to decision making and service improvement. The REP Team focuses on hearing children's voices and ensuring they are active participants in decision making about their lives and their services. One example how joint working is supporting children in care is that there are now two looked after children on Brent Youth Parliament, supported by participation and

engagement work. Information obtained by children and young people through participation initiatives is now actively shared with all IROs to support and inform their practice.

Planned activity to improve the IRO function of the REP Team and make an impact on positive outcomes for looked after children for 2016/17 are as follows:

1. Close management and monitoring timeliness of reviews with the aim of increasing this to at least 95%. Monthly performance reporting is now in place to drive timeliness.
2. Identify resource through the Department administration review to support more effective coordination of reviews.
3. Taking forward the messages from the 'Bright Spots' survey, working with children to develop services and monitoring impact through an annual survey with a target of 40% of children in care responding.
4. Thematic audits on identified issues including IRO scrutiny of Pathway Plans and independent living, timeliness of LAC Review paperwork and IRO involvement in placement moves. Learning and Development initiatives to be put in place following these audits as required.
5. Consult and decide upon the future arrangements for the IRO functions of the service and have these in place for 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018.
6. Review the application of the Signs of Safety model in LAC Reviews. This is to ensure that the use of Signs of Safety in LAC Reviews becomes a more impactful and helpful approach for all looked after children, their carers, social workers and IROs.
7. Evidence that continuous learning from feedback from children and young people, parents, professionals and carers is fully embedded into the Learning and Development offer.

### **13. What Happens Next?**

- This report will be presented to senior leaders and Brent Care In Action for their comments and to agree on any actions arising
- This report will then be shared with the Corporate Parenting Committee
- The REP Team Service Plan for 2017/18 will be amended with any feedback

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