

IRO Annual Report April 2013 – March 2014

The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Children in Care

Purpose of service and legal context

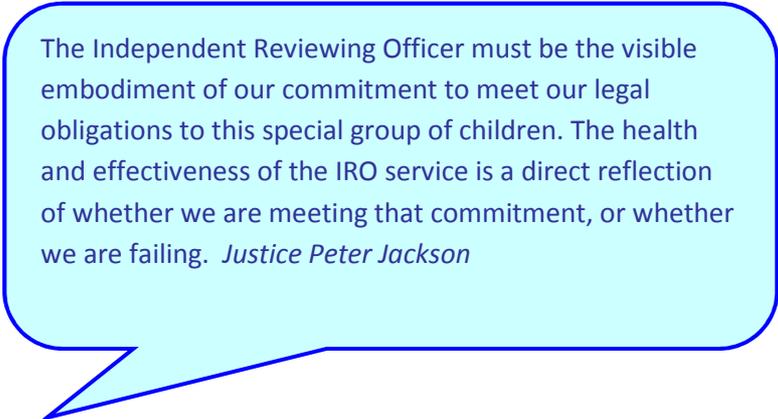
The Independent Review Officers' (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the Review process to a wider overview 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 Children Looked After (CLA) and for challenging drift and delay.

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Introduction

- 1.1 An annual report of the Independent Reviewing (IRO) Service for looked after children is required in accordance with the Children and Young Person's Act 2008 and subsequent statutory guidance published by the Department for Children Schools and Families in 2010(The IRO Handbook)
- 1.2 This report is presented to the Strategic Director for Children and Young People and shared with the Lead Member for Children and the Corporate Parenting Committee for scrutiny. This report is a public document.
- 1.3 This report provides a summary of work completed by the IRO service in Brent for the period between 1st April 2013 and 31st March 2014
- 1.4 The recently published National Children's Bureau research entitled 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings in regards to the efficacy of IRO services and outlines a number of important recommendations which includes 'the Importance of Listening to children and making sure their rights are protected ', 'if there is a conflict of interest the IRO must be on the side of the child'.



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. *Justice Peter Jackson*

This Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Services within the London Borough of Brent as required by statutory guidance.

2. The Legal Context

- 2.1 Every child who is looked after by the London Borough of Brent (LBB) must have a care plan which details the long term plan for the child's upbringing and the arrangements made by LBB to meet the child's day to day needs. All local authorities have a statutory

duty to regularly review that care plan within legislative timescales (Care Planning and Case Review Regulations 2010)

- 2.2 The appointment of an IRO for every looked after child is a legal requirement under section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and subsequent Review of Children's Cases Regulations 2004. The role of the IRO was strengthened in the Children and Young Person's Act 2008 and Care Planning and Placement Regulations 2010.
- 2.3 From December 2012 the Looked After Children (LAC) population was extended to include those children placed on remand in secure units or youth offending institutions under the legal sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) arrangements. This Act places a responsibility on Local Authorities to treat all children remanded to custody as LAC up to the age of 18 years with each young person having a remand plan which is the equivalent of a care plan.

3. Structure of the IRO Service

- 3.1 The Service is based at Brent Civic Centre and has been reviewed and as a consequence seen a change of management since April 2014. The service originally sat within Brent's Children's Social Care Commissioning and Resource Service but now sits within Brent Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service and has been renamed as The Independent Reviewing Team. An experienced manager was appointed to take a lead on service improvements and manage the team in April 2014. This post gives additional capacity to the team by delivering strategic reports and overseeing the team's work. The IRO Manager undertakes a limited number of reviews, and observations of practice throughout the year.
- 3.2 Brent directly employed one full-time equivalent IRO during 2013 / 14. This IRO has worked for Brent for over 14 years and carries a case load of 60 – 65 children at any given time. This case load is in line with the national and Ofsted recommendations. The reviewing officer is valued for their work amongst the service as an expert and as such offers guidance on care planning generally as well as reviewing children. In 2013 /14 he took a leading role in a consultation group with children and young people, running the Afghan unaccompanied minors group, as well as taking a lead role in the annual Brent Achievement Award for Looked After Children.
- 3.3 The remainder of the reviewing officers are freelance experienced social workers, contracted through an independent agency – Aidhour Ltd (a not-for-profit company established 1998). All are qualified and experienced above the minimum requirements with the correct DBS and registration requirements. Many of the IROs have been doing reviews for Brent for a considerable number of years and know the children very well. In some instances and given the turnover of front line social work staff Brent has experienced over the recent years the IROs can sometimes be the most consistent and trusted person in the child's life apart from their carers.
- 3.4. Once allocated, the IRO is 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 midway reviews, liaise with the Child's Guardian and other professionals as and when required. Aidhour Ltd monitors the work of their IROs to ensure that case work is undertaken to agreed standards and deadlines by ensuring that LAC reviews are completed within the required timescales by auditing samples of LAC reports and individual consultation.

3.5 The Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service in Brent oversees the work of the Aidhour IRO during contract monitoring meetings and direct observations of the 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 the IRO manager. Agenda items focus on improving practice and developments are agreed prior to the meeting. An annual meeting with the Strategic Director for Children and Young People attended by all the IROs has now been arranged with the purpose of integrating them more into developments in the service and for the purpose of information sharing.

3.6 IROs that carry out reviewing tasks have secure remote access to Brent's 'Framework i' the integrated children's service data base(FWi) so that they can input their reports and review the child's care plan progress. They are able to add a case note to a child's case record on FWi, record the progress of mid-review care plans and identify any relevant issues that require escalation to senior managers for resolution.

3.7 IROs have secure remote access to Brent's 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.

3.8 The Team has remained stable with only one change in staffing in the last 12 months; this has led to continuity of IRO for many children. In terms of diversity there are a mix of IROs both within the Permanent and Aidhour IRO provision.

3.9 The team of IROs including those permanent and Aidhour as of 31st March 2014 comprised of 7 (44%) males and 9 (56%) females. Of the children looked after on the same date 193 (55%) were male and 155 (45%) were female.

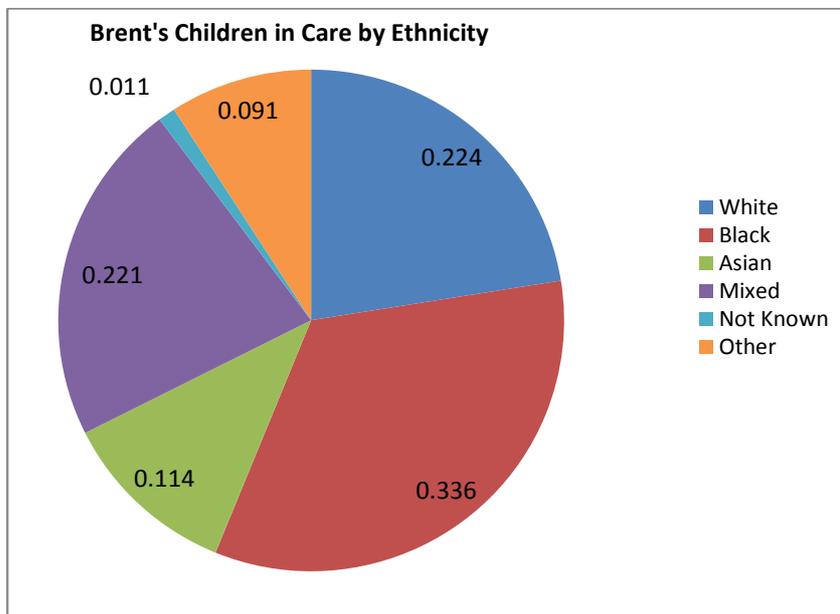
3.10 The ethnicity of the IROs is less diverse than that of the looked after population

The IROs as follows

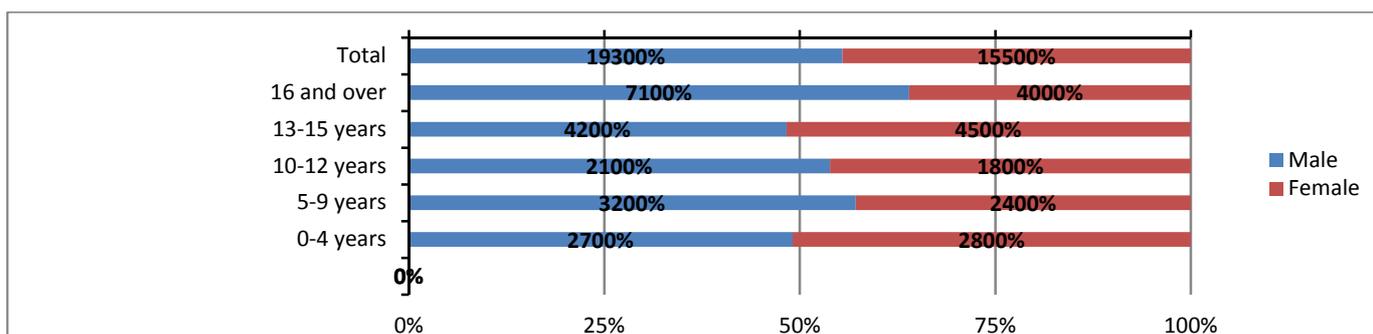
IRO Ethnicity	
White	14
Mixed	0
Asian or Asian British	1
Black or Black British	1

3.11 The ethnic identity of the cohort of children looked after as of 31 March 2014 was as follows:

Ethnicity		
White	79	22.4%
Mixed	77	22.1%
Asian or Asian British	40	11.4%
Black or Black British	117	33.6%
Other	36	9.1%
Total	349	100%



Children in Care by Age & Gender		
	Male	Female
0-4 years	27	28
5-9 years	32	24
10-12 years	22	18
13-15 years	42	45
16 and over	71	40
Total	194	155



3.12 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 Professions Council code of conduct and Brent's internal Policy and Procedures.

4. Quantitative information about the IRO service

A total of **348** children were Looked After on 31st March 2014

A total of **946** reviews were held between April 1st 2013 and March 31st 2014

4:1 **55** looked after young people reached 18 years.

4:2 The IRO Handbook recommends that case loads for IROs should be between 50 and 70, nationally, the average caseload for an IROs ranges between 50 and 95 (identified in a recent December 2013 national benchmarking survey). The size of caseload alone does not indicate the workload for each IRO; the number of other responsibilities, the number of Out of Borough placements large family groups, disability and unaccompanied asylum seekers UASC and the complexities to be taken into consideration when looking at the overall caseload.

5. CLA population over 12 months

5:1 There were 348 looked after children as of the 31st March 2014. The LAC population has fluctuated over the period from April 2013- March 2014 from 336 – 348 as children have come into and left care during the year.

5:2 IROs complete on average between 20 - 30 Reviews in any given month. These reviews are a mix of first Reviews and subsequent Reviews. First Reviews are all booked by Brent business support team in liaison with Aidhour. Most case reviews are held at a child's placement but where there are issues or difficulties they are held at the Civic Centre.

6 Participation of children and the Advocacy Service

6:1 It is always preferable that children attend their review meetings to share their views directly. However, there are some children with special needs such as some forms of autism or behavioural problems who cannot easily manage disruption to their daily routine or sitting in a meeting discussing their Care Plan. Thus, such a forum is inappropriate for some children. IROs are sensitive to these children's needs and work with the social worker and carers to listen to a child's views, wishes and feelings in other ways other than in a meeting and incorporate them into their care plan.

Attendance at Reviews

Attended – represented self	588	62.1%
Attended – represented by advocate	4	0.4%
Attended – conveyed views symbolically	4	0.4%
Attended – no contribution	2	0.2%
Child aged under 4 years at the time of the review	144	15.2%
Did not attend – conveyed views by other medium	194	20.5%
Did not attend – no contributions or views	10	1.0%
Total	946	100 %

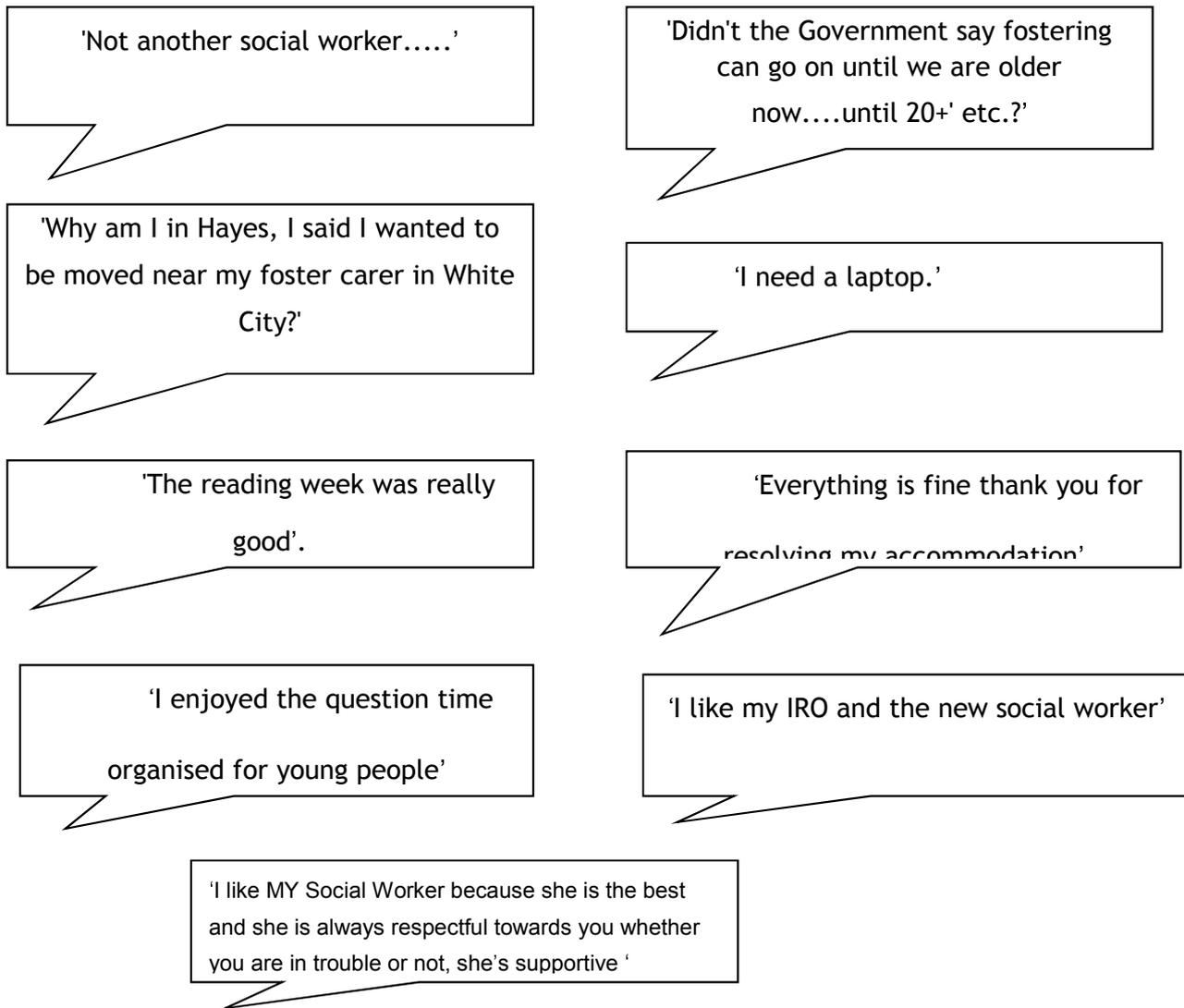
Advocacy Service

6:2 The Advocacy Service for looked after children is provided through a contract with Aidhour Ltd commissioned on an individual basis. An annual report on this service has been prepared. During 2013/14, four children took the opportunity to use an advocate to speak on their behalf while attending their review

6:3 In addition, the department currently has a contractual agreement with Barnardos for the provision of Independent Visitor Services managed by Brent Care Planning Service and eight children were allocated independent visitors through the Barnardos contract

6:4 The overwhelming majority of children and young people aged four years plus (583 reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves.

6:5 IROs report the following comments/views made at review meetings to them by children and young people who are looked after in Brent



7. Escalations and conflict resolution

- 7.1 One of the key functions of the IRO is to identify and resolve problems arising out of the care planning process.
- 7.2 In Brent this is called the Looked after Children Escalation Management Process.
- 7.3 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.
- 7.4 If the issue is not resolved by the Team Manager or Principal Officer the IRO will escalate further to the Head of Service.
- 7.5 Information elicited from the issues identified in escalations is used to target support and challenge practice to make improvements. Young people feedback that they feel supported when IROs raise concerns and alerts about practice

- 7.6 A total of 58 escalations were initiated by IROs in 2013/14.
- 7.7 No cases were escalated to the Operational Director, or The Strategic Director of Children and Young People in 2013/14. The service has identified this as an area that will need to be kept under review in the coming year to ensure that processes are being followed correctly and escalations are given adequate priority.
- 7.8 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 2012/2013 there were no referrals made to CAFCASS by IROs in Brent.
- 7.9 Among the 58 cases raised by IROs the majority were dealt with at SW/Team Manager 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
 - Lack of Management oversight
 - Transition to semi independent units
 - IRO's were not consulted on a change of care plan
- 7.10 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 the IRO.
- 7.11 Further training has been identified by IROs for managers and social workers on the need to progress the decisions of a LAC review in line with the 2013 statutory guidance and requirements that the progress of LAC review decisions are monitored through formal supervision. This has now been made part of induction training and the IRO manager has met with Brent Learning and Development manager and will provide an induction and specific training about the 2010 regulations / IRO handbook and the role of the IRO.
- 7:12 The current consultation forms are being replaced with more interactive, child friendly and colourful forms. These forms were devised in consultation with children and young people and will be implemented by the end of July 2014.
- 7:13 Brent's permanency procedure with respect to Long Term Fostering is being reviewed by Placement and Care Planning Services to ensure clarity and avoid delay. Permanency planning will also continue to be reviewed through Brent's LAC tracking panel.

8. LAC review timescales

8:1 On average 97.1% of reviews were held within timescale during April 1st 2013 to March 31st 2014. This is slightly (1%) less than achieved in 2012/ 13. The figure for 2012 and 13 was 98.3 % (1.1%)

Review Type	2013/14
Total Number 4 week initial review	184
Total number of 2 nd review	114
Total number of Subsequent review	648
Total No. of all reviews	946
% of reviews held on time	97.1%
% of LAC communicating their views to their last review in the year	99%
Total Numbers of Children	
Total number of LAC	352
Total number of children and young people remanded to LA or custody requiring a LAC review	36

8:2 The majority of late reviews are first reviews where the notification has not been received within the required timescale. The key issues in relation to this are;

- Placements with Connected Persons not recorded as Section 20 (S20)
- Mother and Baby placements where Court have made an Interim Care Order (ICO)

8:3 All Children who are remanded to Local Authority care are supported by Brent's Adolescent Support team within Brent Care Planning service.

9. Health of Looked After Children

- 9:1 IROs work closely with the LAC health team, routinely checking and monitoring that health assessments have taken place at each review meeting
- 9.2 Between 1st April 2013 and March 31st 2014, 88% of Health Assessment were completed within the required time scale. This is less than achieved in the previous year and will continue to be monitored. However in 2014/15 there has been an increase and improvement on the number of children under going timely dental check and immunisations to date.

Health of LAC	31st March 2013		31st March 2014	
Total LAC	227		218	
Convictions	10	4.40%	13	5.9%
Immunisations	178	78.40%	180	82.5%
Teeth Checks	204	89.86%	201	92.2%
Health Assessments	225	99.10%	192	88%
Substance misuse	13	5.70%	78	35.7%
Intervention offered	1	0.40%	77	35.3%
<i>Intervention taken</i>	1	0.40%	64	29.3%
C19 Health Indicator	<u>94%</u>		<u>90%</u>	

10. Achievements and impact of IRO service:

- 10:1 The service has implemented and achieved the following improvements by working closely in partnership with the participation officers and other stakeholders such as the Looked After Education Team

- Capture children and young people's views
- Undertaken more thorough preparation.
- Timeliness of reviews
- Contributions and participation of partner agencies
- Quality of Care Plan

- Management oversight of cases has improved
- Tracking and monitoring of Care Plans
- Devised more child friendly consultation papers and Foster Carers profile.
- Achievement award.

- 10.2 In 2013/14 the IROs worked closely with the Participation Officers who sit within Brent Care Planning Service and Brent Fostering and Adoption Services to listen to children's views. Young people told us that they wanted to have more information about the placement moves and in particular about the foster carers with whom they would be living. To respond to this request and through the collaborative work within service areas a child friendly foster carers profile for all Brent's carers has been developed.
- 10.3 This gives an opportunity for children and young people to have an age appropriate understanding of the proposed placement and helps them to make an informed decision as to whether the placement would be right for them or not. Children have told us they like this approach and seeing a picture of who is in the household, what the house rules are which bedroom they will have and if there are any pets.
- 10.4 Children told us that they didn't like the format of the consultation form they complete prior to their looked after reviews. New looked after children consultation papers have been devised and developed by children supported by the Participation Officers and implementation for these profiles is planned for the end of July 2014

11. Areas for Development in 2014/15:

- 11.1 Since the service has moved in to the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service further developments have been identified to ensure the IROs continue to undertake their role in away that makes continuous improvements to the lives and plans for Brent's looked after children .
- 11.2 These developments will be led by the IRO manager and Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service and monitored as part of the contracting arrangements with Aidhour. A key focus of this work will be the rigorous scrutiny of IRO performance and the auditing of Care Plans and decision making to improve quality for individual cases and service improvements.

Information gathered from these activities will be used by the IRO manager and Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance as part of the performance and appraisal process with IROs and the monitoring of the quality of the service as a whole. In addition this information will also contribute to the following areas;

- To inform the Children's Social Care quarterly quality assurance reports
Inform regular quarterly meetings with the Directors of Aidhour to review the contact, service provision and problem solve. The IRO service requires direct access to the Strategic Director for Children and Young People and an annual meeting will take place.

- An audit of all Reviews and observations of practice of the 'in house' and Aidhour IROs.
- Develop a children's annual report about their experiences of being in care in Brent.
- Create greater understanding of the role of the IRO with social workers and support professional practice in care planning.

Proposed Outcomes for the Development Work

- 11.3 Improved understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the IRO service will be achieved through seeking service user feedback to help identify and drive improvement. Feedback on the IRO service will be sought from children and young people, parents and carers, social workers and other agencies through the introduction of evaluation forms post review.
- 11.4 Progress for children will continue to be driven by the service through improving participation of children and young people in reviews. The IRO Service will be working with Brent Participation Service and young people themselves in identifying areas for development.
- 11.5 Progress for children will also be driven by continued improvements in the levels of scrutiny, challenge and monitoring of care plans by the IRO service. IROs will continue to be encouraged to escalate issues identified when appropriate. The LAC escalations will be tracked, monitored and analysed by the IRO service and used to inform organisational learning, service improvement and recommendations to corporate parents when appropriate. The on-going monitoring of cases by IROs will be scrutinised through the quality assurance framework.
- 11.6 Parental participation will continue to be monitored. IROs are required to actively encourage participation through discrete attempts to contact the parents via letter, telephone contact and visits and invite them to reviews where appropriate and gather their views. This requirement will be monitored through the current quality assurance framework of auditing.
- 11.7 The Family Justice Review noted that there needs to be effective links between the courts and IROs and that there should be strong working relationships between IROs and Children's Guardians. Links between both local services will be strengthened with IROs and Guardians being provided with each other's details. The IRO Manager will in addition make contact with the Service Manager for CAFCASS at the West London Family Court to ensure that communications work smoothly.
- 11.8 The IRO service will contribute to driving improvements in the timeliness of placements of looked after children following an agency decision that the child should be adopted by raising LAC alerts and monitoring progress between reviews as appropriate.
- 11.9 The IRO service will contribute to driving improvements to the health of children looked after through closer working relationship with the LAC health team to ensure health assessments are completed and targets are achieved..

12. Monitoring and Review

12:1 Circulation of the annual IRO report will be to the Social Care Management Team, to members of Children's Senior Leadership Team. The report will be shared by the Strategic Director for Children and Young People with the Lead Member for Children and Young People at the Corporate Parenting Committee.

12.2 The IRO service in its current form has only been in place since April 2014 however separating the service from the Commissioning Service has already seen improvements in;

- The confidence in the service and its ability to be more self critical and address issues. Escalations are now reported on a monthly basis by each IRO
- Stronger relationship with the Aidhour contracted IROs with greater oversight of their work.
Observation of Practice and target setting in monitoring meetings
- Increased attention to midway review process with more taking place and recorded
An episode has been created on Framework I for this purpose and to report accurately.
- Access to Frame Work i for all IROs with more effective and reliable electronic record keeping.
All IRO are now uploading documents
- Increased management oversight of quality of Care Plans.
The IRO team manager is auditing all care plans
- Ability to respond to peaks of service requirement with more in house resource.
The IRO manager is now carrying a case load of children to review

Sarah Alexander

Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance