
REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Report

Reasons for the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the statutory Director of Social Services for Children and Young People with information about the role, function and activity of the IRO Service.

Background

2. The purpose of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is to ensure that the care plan for a Looked After Child clearly sets out the help, care and support that they need and takes full account of their wishes and feelings. Local authorities are required by law to appoint an IRO for each Looked After Child.
3. Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, makes provision for Looked After and accommodated children that currently exist in Part 3 of and schedule 2 of the Children Act 1989. IRO's convene and chair reviews for all children looked after by the Council; be they subject to care orders, accommodated voluntarily, placed with foster carers, in residential or secure establishments, living with kinship carers or placed for adoption.
4. Changes to Care Planning, Placement and Case Reviews (Wales) Regulations 2015 have strengthened the IRO role. IROs are now not only responsible for chairing statutory reviews but also for monitoring children's care plans on an on-going basis. IROs should also monitor the local authority's overall performance as a 'corporate parent' for Looked After Children. As a "Corporate Parent" all those who have responsibility for Looked After Children should act as a responsible and conscientious parent would act for their own children
5. Independent Reviewing Officers have specific responsibility to escalate concerns about Looked After Children, through a dispute resolution process, if it cannot be resolved within the line management structure, the process allows escalation through to the Chief Executive level within the Local Authority and ultimately to CAF/CASS Cymru to consider legal action if necessary. This escalation step will only be taken if all other avenues of resolution have been exhausted in turn. In the last six months, there have been no escalations to CAF/CASS Cymru for consideration of legal proceedings.

Issues

6. The Independent Safeguarding and Reviewing unit came into being in October 2014. During this time there have been a number of changes to the management structure. The most recent changes in the senior management structure has seen the appointments of an interim Operational Manager and two Service Managers all of whom joined the service in November and December 2015.
7. Regulatory guidance requires the IRO service to be managed by an officer who does not have line management responsibility for individual children's cases or service provision. The Independent Reviewing Officers are managed by a Service Manager who has no line management responsibility for case work, or care planning decisions affecting Looked after Children.
8. Attached at Appendix 1 is the second annual six month monitoring report for 2015/16.

Financial Implications

9. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

Legal Implications

10. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

RECOMMENDATION

11. The Committee is recommended to
 - (1) note the information contained in the report; and
 - (2) make any observations or comments on the six month monitoring report.

TONY YOUNG
Director of Social Services
18 May 2016

The Six Month Monitoring Report February 2016.

Adoption and Children Act 2002 and The Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (Wales) Regulations 2004

1. Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance Wales 2004 sets out the requirements of the IRO's and Responsible Authority in more detail. The key outcomes envisaged are:
 - Focus on needs of children and ensuring they are addressed.
 - Minimising drift.
 - Consistency of care planning and decision-making.
 - Involvement of appropriate persons in the process. The Reviewing Officers Guidance 2004 clearly requires an IRO to chair reviews of children who are:
 - In an adoptive placement prior to an adoption order being granted;
 - Looked after subject to a statutory order or accommodated with the agreement of parents.
 - Young people in Young Offender Institutions subject to a Care Order or on remand as required under Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offender's Act 2012 (LASPO 2012)

Frequency of reports

2. The Independent Reviewing Service provides a report to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee twice a year and will also provide twice yearly reports to the LSCB.

The Reviewing Service

3. The Service comprises of 10 IROs in post made up of full and part time positions. Due to staff sickness there are three agency workers who are covering vacant positions and sickness. The service offers IROs who have substantial experience with relatively new staff member's joining the service within the last 12 months. There is a buddying system in place to support new staff. 3 IRO's are currently being trained to undertake reviews for the Integrated Family Support Team (IFST). These reviews are also monitored and tracked by the IRO's.
4. All IRO and Child Protection (CP) chairs in the service are able to carry dual functions chairing Looked After Children reviews and/or child protection conferences. This has improved the effectiveness of the IRO function and quality assuring the support available for Looked After Children.
5. Immediate line management responsibility for the IROs is undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Service Manager.
6. There is also an interim POVA (The Protection of Vulnerable Adults) Safeguarding Service Manager in post who is responsible for the management

of POVA Service and Safeguarding Education Service. The review of the POVA service has seen the development of a suite of documents which will enable information to be recorded on Care First and reduce the duplication of work currently held in Word documents. POVA has also been considered for a move to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) after April, these arrangements have not completely been finalised, as to whether POVA moves to the MASH as a whole service or whether POVA presence in MASH will be on a duty rota basis.

7. The work of the Corporate Safeguarding Board continues to work through the recommendations made by the Welsh Audit Office (October 2014). As mentioned in the previous report in August 2015 The Corporate Safeguarding Board will:
 - i. Ensure the compliance of all Council Directorates with key safeguarding requirements in relation to children and vulnerable adults
 - ii. Support the Statutory Director of Social Services in the discharge of his/her wider safeguarding duties.
 - iii. Support HR in the delivery of key vetting and barring requirements and workforce development.
 - iv. Provide an Annual Corporate Safeguarding Report, setting out the performance of all Directorates, in relation to vetting and barring, staff safeguarding training, and the operation of front-line services in terms of their effectiveness in identifying and referring safeguarding concerns.
 - v. Review and develop relevant corporate safeguarding standards and policy.
 - vi. Review and develop appropriate corporate safeguarding performance measures.
 - vii. Advise the Head of the Paid Service and recommend relevant action in relation to corporate safeguarding standards and policy.
 - viii. Promote effective cross Directorate safeguarding practice particularly in terms of information sharing and data collection, front-line operational awareness, staff training and wider partnership engagement.
8. In addition a safeguarding awareness raising DVD has been developed to support those staff across the council who do not work directly with vulnerable children or adults in order to help them identify safeguarding issues in their day to day roles. The corporate safeguarding board meets quarterly to review and update an agreed work plan arising from the recommendations made by the Welsh Audit Office.

Independent Reviewing officer workload

9. The team works on the basis that each IRO (FTE) is responsible for the reviews of up to 65 Looked After Children. Caseloads presently are running between 60 and 95 children. There are a number of reasons why case loads are variable ranging from part time staff hold a smaller case load, to mixed case loads from some IRO's undertake Child Protection conferences and Looked after children reviews.
10. The team is located at County Hall, although majority of the reviews are conducted within the community, usually in the child or young person's placement setting. There are travelling requirements involved in these reviews

where children have been placed in North of Scotland, London, Manchester and Devon and Cornwall. We currently have 202 looked after children placed outside of the authority. There has been a decrease of children placed out of county within the last six months with this figure being 213 at the end of September 2015.

Purpose of reviews

11. The purpose of the review meeting is to consider the plan for the child, monitor progress and enable decisions to be made. It is a statutory requirement for each looked after child to have an effective care plan that meets their day to day long term needs and which identifies the outcomes for the child. The plan achieves this by setting objectives for work with the child, birth family and caregivers in relation to the child's developmental needs. These needs include health, education, emotional wellbeing and behavioural development, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, and self-care skills.

Frequency of Reviews

12. Looked After Children reviews must be conducted at the following frequency:

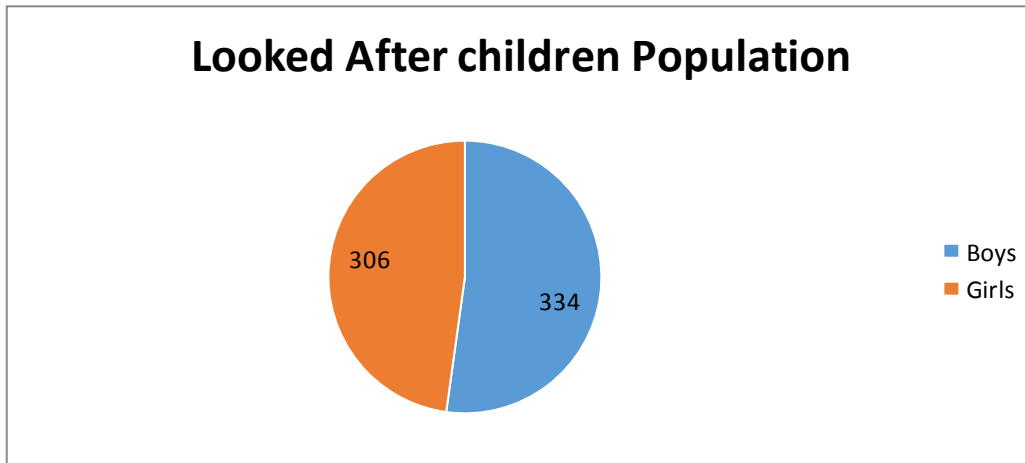
- Within 28 days of a child becoming looked after.
- Subsequently within 3 months
- 6 monthly thereafter,

13. Reviews should be convened earlier if there is a significant change in the child's care plan or failure to carry out an important aspect of that plan. The cycle begins again from the date the child is placed with an adoptive family.

Quality Assurance role

14. The IRO's provide a quality assurance role through regular review of cases. This provides appropriate challenge to social work practice and care plans for looked after children. As part of their input to the new Quality assurance framework to be implemented in April, IRO's will be required to audit one case file each month and provide feedback of their findings to the Quality Assurance Officer. The Quality Assurance Framework provides a systemic monitoring and evaluation of practice, policies and procedures. This will be achieved through monthly case file auditing. The findings from the monthly audits will drive service improvement, identify areas of practice that are good or in need of further development through training.

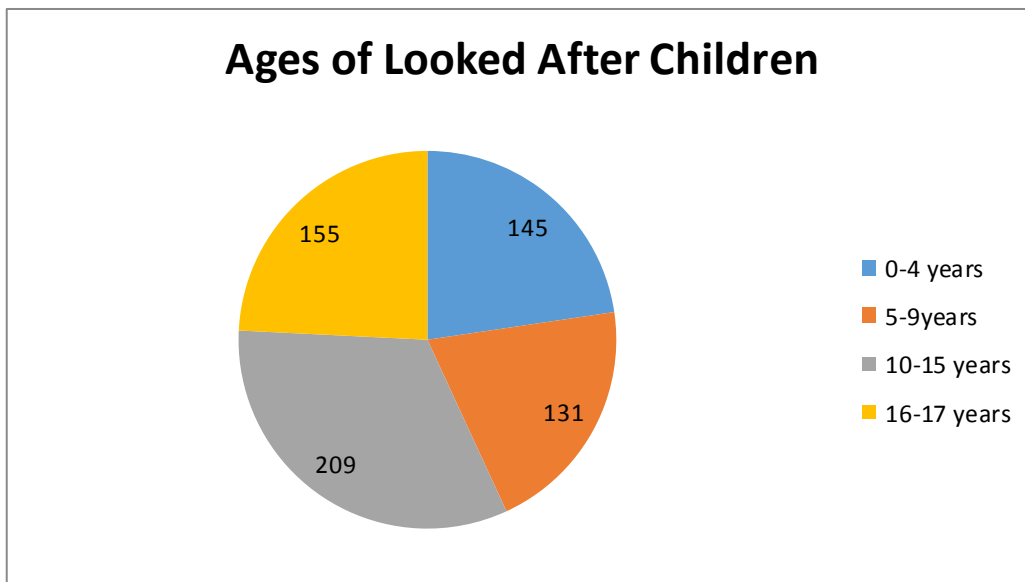
Looked After Children Performance Information



Gender

Male	334	(52%)
Female	306	(48%)
Total	640	

15. We have seen a drop in the number of looked after children since the last reported figures of June 2015. Previously we had a total of 662 looked after children. This is a reduction of 22 Looked After Children, 16 boys and 6 girls, a reduction of 3.4 %. This is mainly due to Looked After children reaching the age of majority and successful reunification with their families.

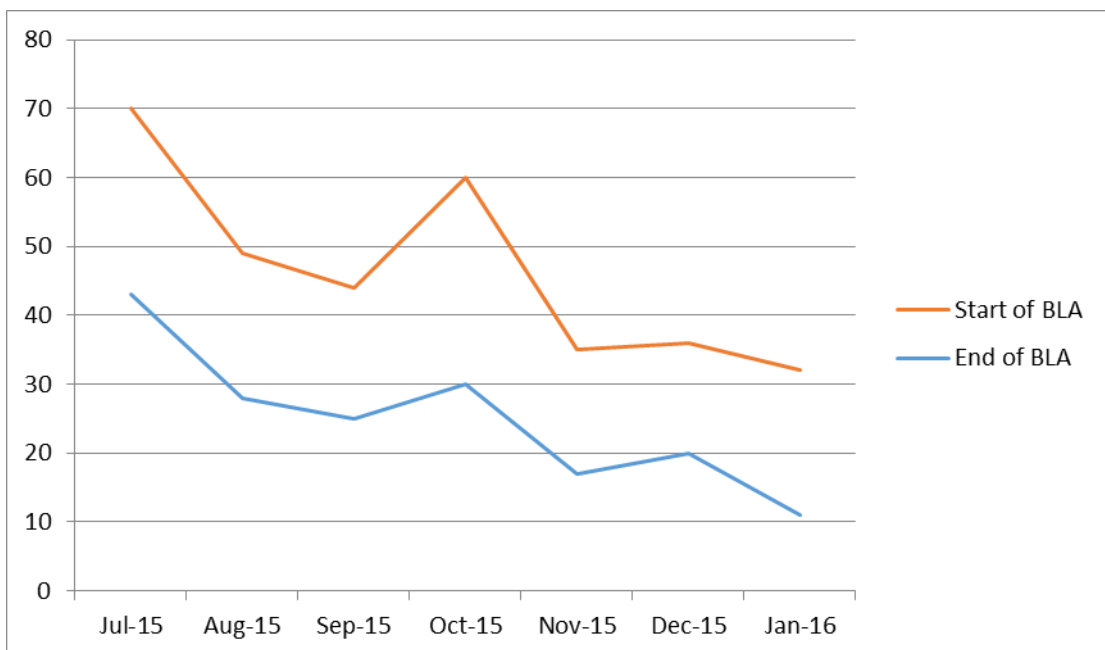


Age

0-4	145	(23%)
5-9	131	(20%)
10-15	209	(33%)
16-17	155	(24%)
Total	640	100%

16. There has been an increase in the number of looked after children between the ages of 0-9 years. Previously there were 264 Looked After Children. We now have an increase by 12 children to 276, an overall increase of this age range of 4.7%. This would suggest we are more robust in the protection of children who are younger and more vulnerable as they lack the ability to care for themselves.

17. The number of looked after children/ young people aged between 10-17 years reduced from 398 in January to June 2015 to 364 during during July to January 2016. This is a reduction of 34 children, a fall of 8.9 %. This figure correlates with the previous chart that has outline the reduction of Looked After children reaching the age of majority and reunification with families.

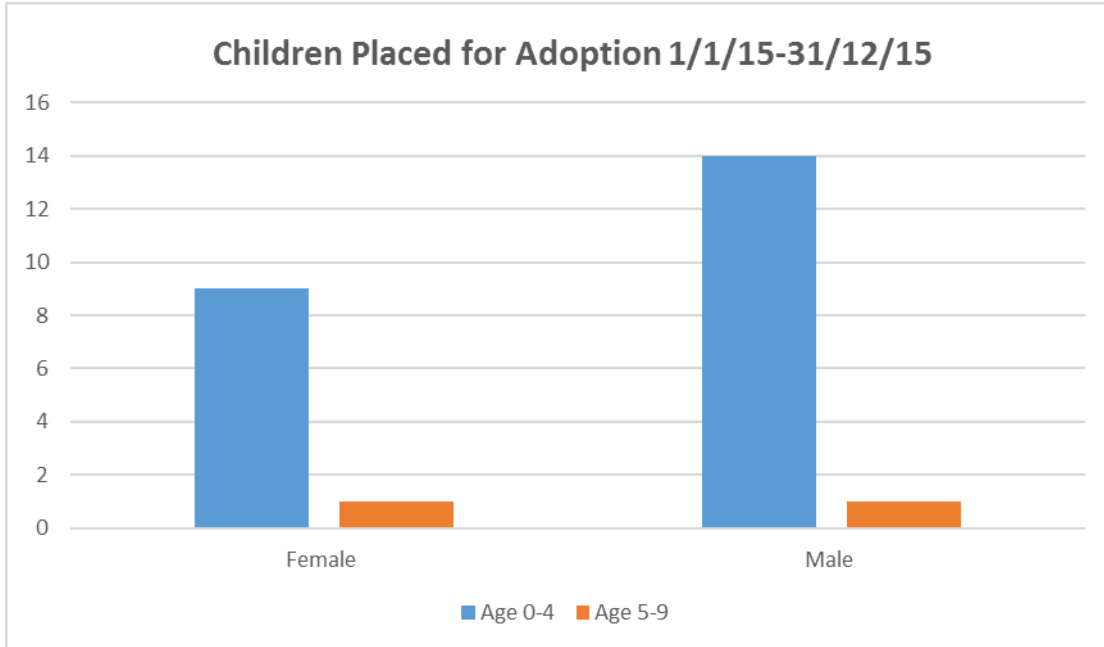


	BLA Starts	BLA Ends
Jul-15	27	43
Aug-15	21	28
Sep-15	19	25
Oct-15	30	29
Nov-15	18	17
Dec-15	16	20
Jan-16	21	11
Total	152	174

18. The monitoring of children becoming looked after and the ending of their period of being looked after has shown a steady reduction over the last 6 months. There was a peak in October 2015 where 30 children became looked after in one month; an average of a child becoming looked after each day. It was noted there was a significant number of sibling groups that became looked after during the month of October which give rise to the figures.

Number of children who have had 3 or more moves

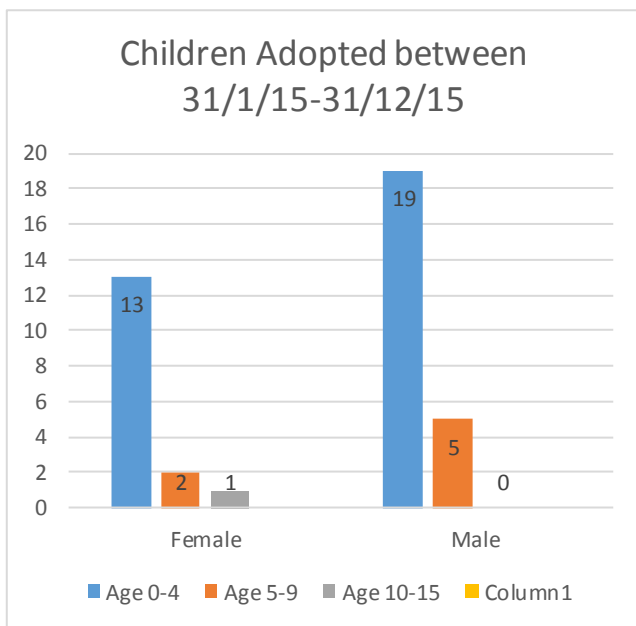
2014/15	68/650	10.46%
2015/16	Figures not available until April/May 16	



Children placed for adoption between 1/1/15 - 31/12/15

Count of Child ID	Gender		
	Female	Male	Total
1) 0-4	9	14	23
2) 5-9	1	1	2
Grand Total	10	15	25

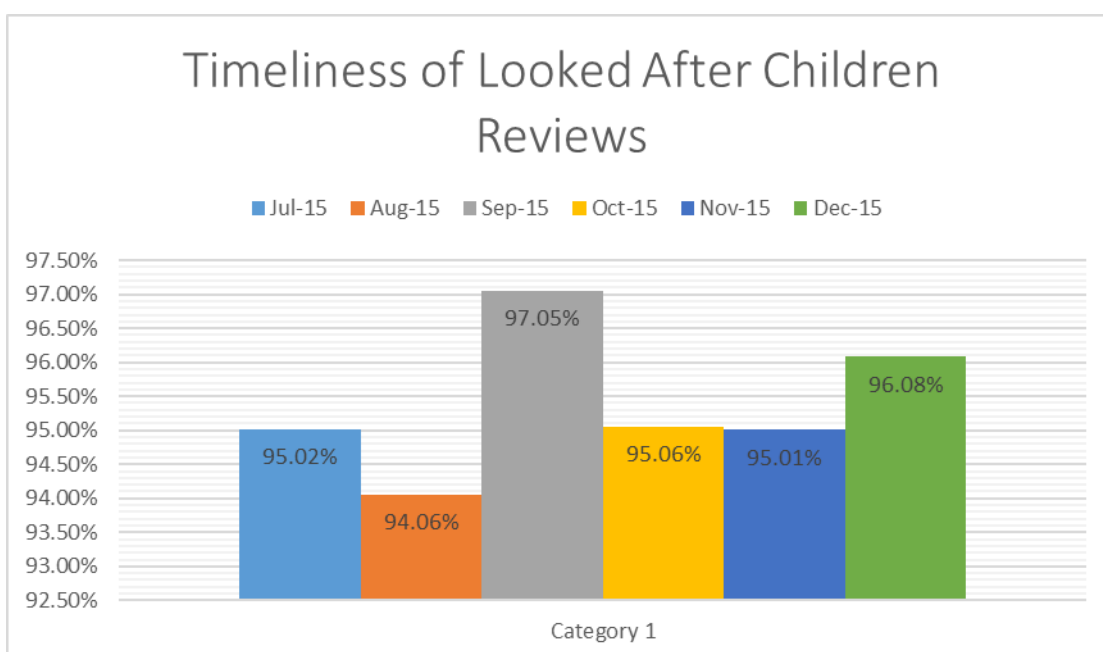
19. These figures demonstrate a decrease of 45% compared with the figures between 1/1/14 – 31/12/14, where 45 children were placed for adoption.
20. There remains disparity between the numbers of children placed for adoption within the 5-9 age range, this emphasizes the need to develop best practice to increase the chances of older children being considered and eventually adopted.



Children adopted between 31/1/15 - 31/12/15

Count of Child ID Age range	Gender		
	Female	Male	Total
1) 0-4	13	19	32
2) 5-9	2	5	7
3) 10-15	1		1
Grand Total	16	24	40

21. A total of 40 children were adopted between 31/1/15 - 31/12/15. A positive increase of 7 children compared to the figures from last year between 21/1/14 – 31/12/14, where 32 children were adopted. This is a total increase of 19 %. This would suggest we have begun to ensure permanency planning for children is timelier at the crucial age of 0-4 years.



	Late	On Time	TOTAL	% On Time
Jul-15	7	138	145	95.2%
Aug-15	7	123	130	94.6%
Sep-15	5	197	202	97.5%
Oct-15	6	131	137	95.6%
Nov-15	6	116	122	95.1%
Dec-15	5	150	155	96.8%
Average				95.8%

22. There was a slight dip in the month of August regarding timeliness of reviews; however, September highlights the high rate of reviews which took place within timescales. Cardiff is performing slightly below the Welsh average of 95.9% for reviews taking place within timescale with our current average of 95.8%. When looking at factors impacting on timeliness it was identified that issues relating to sickness; availability of workers and late notification of start of being looked after impacted on achieving 100% compliance with this timescale.
23. In an effort to address the timeliness of reviews the Service Manager for the Reviewing service is now informed by the performance team on a weekly basis of all children that become looked after. This provides consistency and timeliness of allocation to an IRO, which in turn has resulted in less reviews being held out of timescales. There has also been changes to the internal notification system of start being looked after children which is now incorporated into our Carefirst System.
24. Timeliness of Looked After children reviews is essential to ensure no child or young person has their welfare compromised due to the delay or cancellation of a review. The system in place ensures operational managers must approve a review being cancelled or postponed.

IRO Resolution of Problems

25. IRO's are in a unique position within a local authority they carry out a critical monitoring and challenging role. They can highlight both positive and negative issues that affect children, ensuring that children's views are heard. They should be able to evidence how their role has made a positive difference to the child and helped to improve life chances of children they are involved with.
26. If an IRO believes that the practice or policy of the Local Authority is detrimental to the child's welfare, they have a duty to assertively challenge the Local Authority. A key feature of the IRO role is that they should provide an independent perspective uninfluenced by managerial or resource pressures of the local authority.

Elements of the role of the IRO include:

- To ensure that the welfare of the child in care is safeguarded.
- To provide consultation and advice for the child, social work teams, professionals, carers.

- To make effective challenges through the dispute resolution process when plans are not serving a child needs appropriately.
27. An IRO can raise any issues of practice with the social worker and team manager. If the issues are not addressed within an acceptable timescale the matter is escalated to the Operational Manager, in the relevant service area.
 28. The IRO service provides robust challenge to social work team regarding case that have gone into drift or where the quality of care plan is not good enough. Occasionally, this challenge has met with some resistance from some social workers or managers. Where matters have not been resolved satisfactory they have been escalated to the Assistant Director for resolution. In an effort to raise awareness and a better understanding of the IRO. The IRO service will be attending team meetings to discuss the role of the IRO and develop better working relationships. The escalation protocol has also been updated to reflect what will constitute the trigger for a case alert and/or escalation and will be distributed to all social work staff. Regular IRO's and Manager forums will take place to discuss cases and general practice to ensure better partnership working.
 29. The range of powers available to the IRO include seeking of legal advice if they are not happy with the Local Authority's decisions regarding the long term plans for a child or young person. The Lancashire Judgement – 2012, a case brought by two teenage brothers, against Lancashire County Council and an Independent Reviewing Officer, found the Local Authority and the IRO had breached the boys' human rights by not challenging the care plan.
 30. The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) was found personally responsible, alongside the Local Authority, because he did not hold the Local Authority to account for failing to implement its care plan and review decisions. In response to the Judgement, we have ensured that all IRO's have direct access to independent legal advice, which will aid challenge or should they need to attend court to give evidence. This will be spot purchased as and when required.
 31. The monitoring forms are now embedded as part of the quality assurance framework. This first reporting of the monitoring forms data will take place at the end of April 2016.

Pathway Plans

32. IRO's also chair pathway plan reviews for Young People from age 16 to 17 years who had previously been Looked After. Work is currently underway to develop reviews for Young Adults 18+ years in response to "When I'm Ready" for Young Adults who want to remain in their foster placement or continue in full time education or training. Consideration needs to be given to how these young people would like their reviews to take place in the future.

Consultation with children and young people

33. The IRO ensures during the reviewing process that wishes and feelings of the child/young person are sought and they are encouraged to participate in their review. Parents and foster carers are able to contribute to the review process, and also ensure that younger children also have an opportunity to discuss their feelings about the reviewing process and their experiences in foster care.
34. The Independent Reviewing and Safeguarding Service are reviewing the way they engage children and young people in the reviewing process and will be undertaking a review of how they can encourage children and young people to chair their own reviews. IRO's also visit children and young people in between reviews to ensure they are happy in the placement and they have the opportunity to share their views independently, this also take place if there are issues of concerns. The service is keen to strengthen even further children's participation in reviews. The IROs are currently communicating with other Local Authorities and gathering examples of good practice in this area to contribute to effective communication and engagement with Looked After Children. Some examples provided have used apps using phones and other devices which has been very successful in other authorities and improved engagement and communication.
35. It is intended that the Service Manager for the Reviewing Service will work with the Quality Assurance Officer to undertake quality assurance visits to young people to inform other areas in which we can develop good practice in engaging children and young people in the reviewing process.

Examples of Good Practice

36. 'A' is 12 years old and subject of a care order, she struggled to develop healthy attachments. Initially contact took with her Mother. Contact ceased due to mother's failure to attend and was withdrawn by the local authority in 2013. Contact for Father was subject to completion of parenting programme which he initially complied with but did not complete. He rejected all attempts of communication with Children's Services. 'A' repeatedly requested contact with her Father and it was agreed that she needed to know whether contact could work to help her to move on. Her Father had a settled family life and new partner and child.
37. It was agreed that the IRO would try to contact the Father directly; emphasising the independent nature of her role. This was reinforced by an extended family members and Father agreed to meet with IRO. The social worker and team manager were in agreement with this plan. During this meeting a full and frank discussion took place to exploration the difficult history, but more importantly the need to move forward. Father was persuaded to attend a planning meeting with the IRO and social worker. This meeting was productive and included contact arrangements. To date, these contacts have been consistent and positive for 'A'.
38. "B" is a young person who had been subject to a care order for several years and was struggling at school. "B" was in Year 10 and due to take her GCSEs unfortunately the death of her mother compounded her ability to achieve any

grades for her GCSEs. "B" had no other family members who could support her apart from the Local Authority. "B" wanted to re-do Year 10 but school was resistant; as was Looked After Children Education Liaison despite attempts by the social worker to advocate for her. "B" had experienced a number of changes of social worker but had a consistent IRO throughout. The IRO was therefore able to advocate successfully on her behalf to get senior management support for the plan. 'B' was then able to re-do her Year 10.

39. 'C' and 'D' are subject to "Place with Parents" (PwP) with Mother following significant episodes of Domestic Violence. The Court directed that contact with Father had specific constraints and was structured/closely supervised. Father would not provide an address for correspondence and was often not available by telephone so it was difficult to arrange contact.

40. As he was subject to a restraining order, it was agreed that 'split reviews' would be held with a separate consultation meeting for the Father. These meetings had to be tightly chaired to ensure that the agenda was not deviated from as father had a negative view of women and social services. Difficulties arose during contact sessions when he behaved inappropriately towards the female contact workers. The social worker requested that the IRO chair an additional meeting to explore contact and provide an independent professional view. At this point the children were doing very well in the care of their Mother and the Local Authority would have requested reallocation of the care order, apart from these difficulties. The meeting was chaired by the IRO and it was agreed contact would be stopped as it was not in the best interest of the children and the contact had begun to impact of their emotional wellbeing.

Adoption

41. The IRO team and the adoption team have worked closely together to improve adoption reviews. Timescales remain the same, but by the nature of adoption it is usually the case that these placements are out of county and this has an impact on capacity for IRO's and can affect caseloads. IRO's ensure they remain the chair for children until adoption is fully completed.

Next Steps:

42. The IRO service will

- Hold a service day in September 2016 to discuss the vision of the Service over the next 12 months.
- Develop further the relationship between the IRO and social work teams across the service.
- Commission bespoke training sessions for IRO in recognition of their unique role.
- Develop practice standards for the IRO service,
- Update current escalation protocol.
- Develop of suite of performance indicators.
- Develop of managers and IRO forums.