

**CITY OF
WOLVERHAMPTON
COUNCIL**

Independent Reviewing Officer Service
Annual Report

2017 – 2018

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The IRO Handbook (2010) is the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of children and young people in care. It states that the IRO Manager (known as the Safeguarding Manager – Children, in Wolverhampton) should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Board. It should also be available to the public on the Council website.
- 1.2 This report covers the period from April 2017 – March 2018 This is the eighth annual report.
- 1.3 The Safeguarding Service is based at the Priory Green Building in Pendeford, Wolverhampton.
- 1.4 Dawn Williams is the Head of Safeguarding (HOS) and has overall responsibility for the IRO functions and ensures independence from the line management of cases and the allocation of resources within Children and Families Services. Mandy Lee is the Safeguarding Manager-Children. The management of the IRO team involves the provision of supervision to the IROs and responsibility for the team including ensuring that reviews are held on time and that they are correctly administered. The Safeguarding Manager also manages an IRO who undertakes foster home reviews.
- 1.5 As prescribed by the National IRO Managers Group, this report will endeavour to ‘highlight areas of good practice and areas which require improvement, identify emerging themes and trends, describe areas of work which the service has prioritised during the year, and will prioritise in the coming year.’
- 1.6 The IROs have a key role in assuring the quality of the case planning for those children and young people in care in Wolverhampton. The purpose of this report is to provide information on the work undertaken by the IROs in 2017 – 2018 and to outline the priorities for the next year.

2.0 Purpose of service and legal context

- 2.1 The arrangements for the statutory reviews of children and young people in care in Wolverhampton, were amended and updated by Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Legislation for the reviewing of cases is supported by detailed guidance which has been taken into account in making arrangements in Wolverhampton. The guidance includes Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and the IRO Handbook.
- 2.2 The IRO Handbook states that the statutory duties of the IRO are to:
 - monitor the Local Authority’s performance of their functions in relation to the child’s case;
 - participate in any review of the child’s case;
 - ensure any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority;

- 2.3 The IRO service has an important quality assurance role as outlined in the IRO Handbook: 'As part of the monitoring function, the IRO also has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. This should include identifying patterns of concern emerging not just around individual children but also more generally in relation to the collective experience of its looked after children of the services they receive. Where IROs identify more general concerns around the quality of the authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should immediately alert senior managers about these. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice'
- 2.4 All children and young people in care, including children who are in an adoptive placement prior to an adoption order, are covered by the legislation. This applies to all children who are the subject of a Care Order (under section 31 of the Children Act 1989), or who are voluntarily accommodated for a period of more than 24 hours (section 20 of the Children Act 1989), including those described in this report as in Short Break Care, or who are placed for adoption under the Adoption and Children Act 2002. It also covers those who are compulsorily looked after such as those remanded by the court to local authority accommodation. Since the publication of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) in December 2012, it has been the responsibility of the Local Authority to look after all young people who are remanded into custody. These young people now require an allocated IRO and reviews in their place of custody.

3.0 Quantitative information about the service

- 3.1 The Service has an establishment of 11 FTE IROs. The team has been fully staffed since January 2018. The permanent establishment was extended from nine IROs to 11 FTE in 2017 to reflect the numbers of looked after children. The team was previously supported by additional staff who were seconded or agency staff. The team now has no temporary or agency workers. The Safeguarding Manager-Children is supported by a 0.5 Principal IRO
- 3.2 The team has remained stable, other than the use of agency workers, over the period, and is increasingly experienced. The majority of the team have a mixed caseload of children and young people in care and Child Protection. Three of the IROs only hold children and young people in care cases. The makeup of caseloads is regularly reviewed.
- 3.3 The IRO Handbook recommends IRO caseloads of 50 – 70 children per IRO. The average caseload (including children and young people in care, children on a CP plan, and those receiving care through short breaks (S20) on 31 March 2018 was 92 children. This compares to 81 at March 2017. The difference is due to the increased number of children subject to Child Protection Plans, which has nearly doubled in the last 12 months. Although the caseloads are higher than last year, they are still within reasonable limits.
- 3.4 The team is made up of three men and 10 women. The team is made up of IROs from different ethnic backgrounds. (three black/Asian, one black Afro/Caribbean/mixed heritage and nine white British.) This adequately reflects the children we are serving. The looked after children

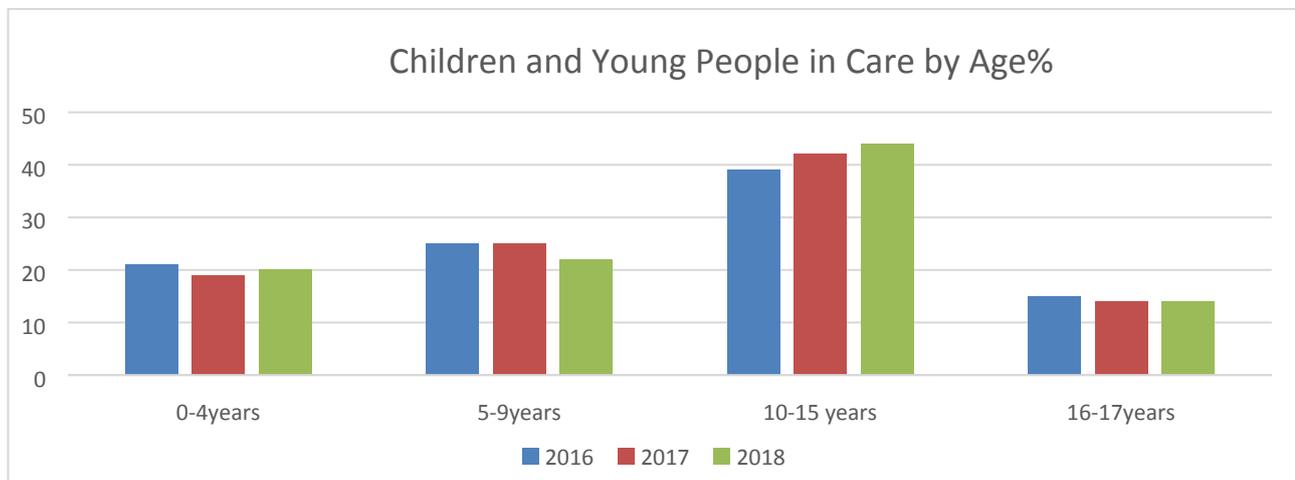
of Wolverhampton were from the following backgrounds on 31.3.18: 60% white British, 5% Asian, 9% black/British/African/Caribbean, 11% mixed white/blackAfrican/Caribbean, 2% mixed white/Asian, 9% other.

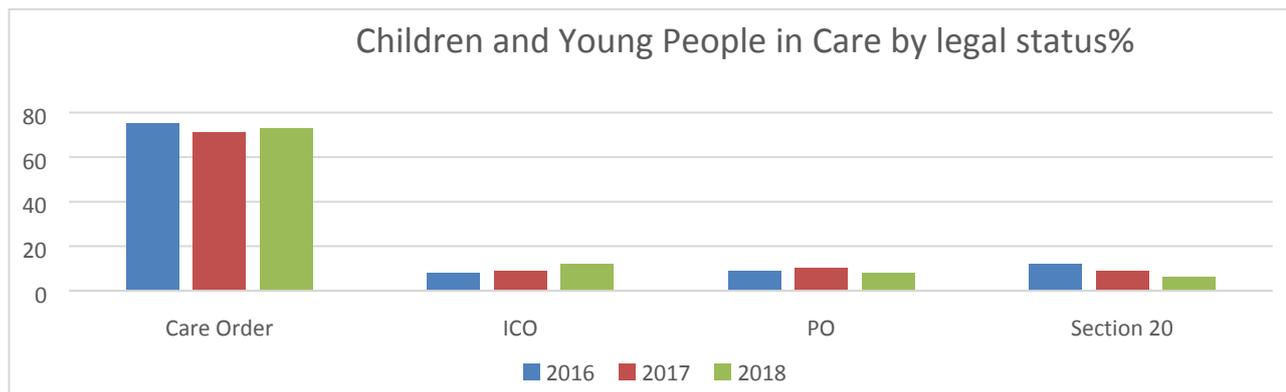
3.5 The service also has one Independent Foster Home Reviewing Officer who is responsible for chairing Foster Home reviews.

4.0 Quantative information regarding the Children and Young People in Care population.

4.1 There were 648 children and young people in care at 31/3/18, compared to 643 in 2017. Of these 287/44% were female (262/41% in 2017) and 361/56% were male (381/59% in 2017). The charts below show the percentage of children in care by age and legal status. The data shows a slight increase in the numbers of young children in care, whilst the proportion of older children has increased. This may be the result of effective plans to move young children on to permanence, whilst there is remaining legacy of older young people who will not leave care until adulthood.

4.2 In relation to legal status, the chart below shows the percentage of all children remaining subject to Care Orders has increased slightly. The proportion currently subject to care proceedings has slightly increased, whilst the percentage subject to section 20 has fallen. This is in line with recent case law which has provided greater clarity about the appropriate use of section 20. The number subject to Placement Orders has reduced slightly.





5.0 Qualitative information about the IRO service

5.1 Under the provisions of the *Review of Children's Cases Regulations (1991)*³ local authorities are required to review the case of any child or young person who is in care or provided with accommodation as follows:

- First review must take place within 28 days of the date upon which the child begins to be looked after or provided with accommodation;
- Second review must be carried out no later than three months after the first review; and
- Subsequent reviews shall be carried out not more than six months after the date of the previous review.

5.2 The date of the next review should be brought forward:

- If there is an unplanned change of placement or other substantial changes to the care plan.
- If the IRO has specific concerns about a child and directs that the review be brought forward.
- Any request from the child or parent(s) for a review to be brought forward should be given serious consideration.

5.3 92% of all children and young people in care in 2017 - 2018 were reviewed in line with statutory timescales (82% in 2016/17). This shows a good improvement on the previous year and demonstrates good performance by the service.

5.4 An IRO is allocated to all children and young people in care within 24 hours of the Safeguarding Service being informed of that child's entry into care. Written information about the IRO and the reviewing service is shared with the child prior to their first review, in the form of child friendly postcard type information booklets. Children can make direct contact with their IRO's mobile phone by calling, by text or by email.

5.5 The majority of sibling groups, whether placed together or not, are allocated to the same IRO. This ensures consistency of information exchange, oversight of care planning and decision-making, including sibling contact, and is particularly of benefit when children have different social workers.

5.6 The involvement of children in their own reviews is regarded as an essential part of the process. *'A key task for the IRO will be to ensure that the review processes, and particularly review meetings, remain child and family centred'* (IRO Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002.) The IRO has an important role in ensuring that the child:

- can make a meaningful contribution to their review;
- speaks for themselves if they are able and willing to do so; and where this is not possible that their views are conveyed by someone else on their behalf or by an appropriate medium; and
- has been given the opportunity to make a written contribution to the meeting, particularly if they have chosen not to attend or are unable to attend for some other reason.

5.7 The recorded achievement in this area of activity is also a measure of local authority performance, although no longer a national performance indicator.

At 31 March 2018 95% of children participated in their reviews. This is an increase on 2017 (93%).

Case example: Child P is female, aged 14 and is diagnosed with global developmental delay and learning disability. The IRO has been allocated for over two years since the child became Looked After. Child P resides with Foster Carers and is settled in this arrangement, but has always maintained her wish to return home. Child P disagrees with the Local Authority Plan that she should stay 'looked after' until she is 18, as she thinks she should be able to go home when she is aged 16. Child P has always been responsive to meeting with the IRO outside of the Review meetings and expresses her views. Child P agreed to begin attending her Reviews about 18 months ago, but struggled to concentrate in the meetings, particularly when her Mother was present, as she was naturally excited to see her. In preparation for the last Review, the IRO visited Child P at home and explained the purpose of the Review again. The IRO has some flash cards with the types of agenda items discussed at Reviews. Child P worked through each card and separated them into piles as to the things she wanted to talk about in the meeting and what she wanted to say about each item. At the Review itself, Child P used the cards again, working through each item in her order of preference and everyone joined in with the discussion. Child P was able to say that she feels very sad that she cannot go home; she understands why this is her Care Plan, but she does not agree with it. While we cannot change this situation; it was empowering for Child P to speak her views and have them formally noted in the Review. Child P effectively chaired her own Review using the cards as an aid which is a fantastic achievement for her.

There will always be a proportion of children who do not want to participate or for a variety of reasons, do not make themselves available to the IRO and do not take up other forms of consultation. IRO's make efforts to offer children a number of ways of participating.

Case Example: Child J is female aged nine and has a Care Plan of Long-term Fostering. The IRO has been allocated for over two years and has visited Child J prior to every Review since becoming her IRO. The IRO has tried to encourage Child J to take an active part in her Review meetings; the previous Review was held at the Foster Carers address and was very informal with Child J showing us her certificates and photos of what she had been doing during the Review period. In preparation for the next Review the IRO visited Child J and asked her views about how the Review meeting should work. Child J was very clear that she did not want to be a part of the Review whether it was held at home or at school; she just feels very uncomfortable in these meetings and there was no way she could think of doing it that would change how she felt. The IRO reminded Child J about the Mind of My Own (MOMO) website and she agreed to look at this again together during the visit. Child J entered her views about the good things that have been happening and answered questions about her daily life. While Child J did not express a clear view about her Care Plan, it was clear that she is happy with her care arrangements and there was nothing she wished the IRO to raise at the Review on her behalf. Child J's participation was achieved without her attending the Review meeting; according to her expressed wish.

- 5.8 Children aged seven and over receive a written invitation to their review meeting along with the consultation document inviting their contribution to the review. The IRO is required to speak with the child alone prior to the first review and before every subsequent review (regulation 36). The requirement for direct contact with the child extends to observation of babies and younger children.
- 5.9 The Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002, states that '*The IRO has an important role in ensuring that all parties to the review are able to make an effective contribution.*' In order to assist in this aim, age appropriate consultation papers continue to be sent to the child/young person, and carers, prior to a review. The child's consultation paper provides the IRO with a picture of the child's feelings about the various aspects of their care and the services he/she is receiving, and assists the IRO in ensuring the child's voice is heard. The service has been aware that many young people would prefer other means to provide their view, and (Mind of My Own) MOMO has been introduced. IRO's are increasingly speaking with parents outside of the review meeting, if their presence is not in the best interests of the child, to ensure they can represent their reviews both in the meeting and in the record of the meeting.
- 5.10 One child was reviewed by an IRO under the Short Break Statutory Guidance (Section 20(4) of the Children Act 1989) in 2017/8 (one in 2016 - 2017).
- 5.11 It should be noted that Ofsted inspection of Wolverhampton in 2017 found that: 'Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are effective in driving improvements in practice and performance, leading to better outcomes for children looked after. A stable and experienced team of IROs

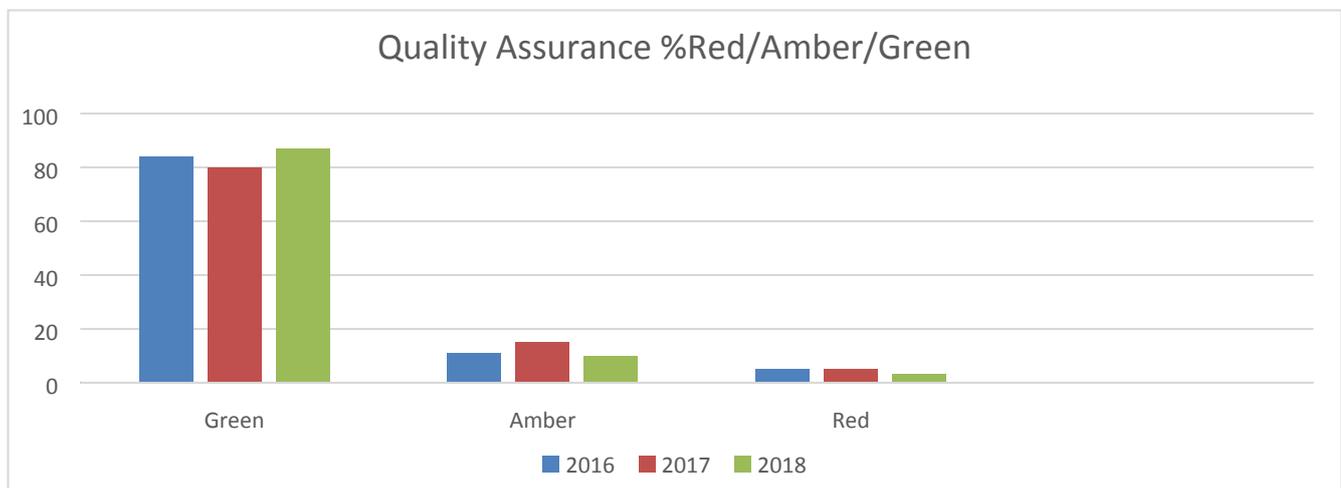
has been given additional resources, to ensure that IROs are able to continue to deliver a high-quality service’.

6.0 Conduct of the organisation in relation to the review

- 6.1 The IROs quality assure each child’s case at every review which include the following:
- Quality of preparation for review by social worker, including report preparation, preparation of the child/young person and sign off by manager,
 - Quality of care planning, including how up to date the care plan is,
 - Quality of contribution by the child/ young person and other attendees, to review,

Detailed reports are now available on the findings of this quality assurance work, which means the service is now able to identify trends and patterns of practice and bring them to the attention of Children’s Social Care. The Safeguarding Manager-Children provides a report to the Children and Young People’s Management Team quarterly, highlighting areas of good practice and areas for concern and action.

- 6.2 The RAG(Red/Amber/Green) quality rating system, in respect of Reviews, including the progress of plans, preparation for the meeting and the quality of reports has been used consistently in Wolverhampton since August 2014. In 2017- 2018, RAG ratings were issued in relation to 1580 Reviews (1615 in 2016-17). The chart below compares ratings over the last three years. This shows an overall improvement in the quality of work, and the percentage where there are serious concerns about drift and delay has reduced.



- 6.3 A notification is automatically sent to the responsible social workers and Social Work Unit manager, and ensures they are alerted to the status (red, amber or green) of the child’s plan. It identifies any concerns the IRO has about a child or their care plan, and should be a clear and valuable part of the quality assurance of the Local Authority’s work which is provided by the IRO. There is an expectation that the responsible Children’s Social Care manager responds to the IRO in all red and amber cases. Where the IRO feels their concern is not being addressed, they would commence the agreed dispute resolution process.

6.4 The IROs complete a Recognition of Excellent or Good Practice notification when there is evidence of high quality practice. 40 notifications were awarded in 2017 - 2018 (17 Excellent, 23 Good). The IROs have recognised the positive impact that recognition of good work has on teams, and therefore actively seeks to improve recognition.

7.0 Conduct of the organisation in relation to Case Management

7.1 During 2017 - 2018 a number of formal dispute resolution protocols were implemented in Wolverhampton. This protocol commences when the IRO identifies serious concerns about drift or delay in a child's case and is unable to resolve the difficulty with the social worker or their manager. There were nine informal stage meetings, five Stage 1 meetings and one Stage 2 meeting.

Case example- Informal stage dispute resolution: Child J is male aged 12 and has a Care Plan of Long-term Fostering. Child J's Foster Placement ended abruptly due to some behaviour exhibited by the child, he then moved to two different temporary Foster Placements. Child J has complex health needs and needed to be settled with Foster Carers who could meet these needs in order that he could access the right treatment in a timely manner. The IRO became concerned about the drift in his care plan and Health Care Plan given the right placement had not been identified. The IRO escalated this to the attention firstly of the Social Work Unit Manager and then the Senior Social Work Manager to express the urgency of the situation. An alternative placement was identified, Child J has moved and he is now accessing the treatment and support he requires.

8.0 Consultation with Young People- Feedback from the Children in Care Council

8.1 The majority of the Children in Care Council when asked about their Independent Reviewing Officer recognised they had one although one or two couldn't recall their name. Following feedback regarding the current "Yellow Booklet" A draft version of the Your Review, Your Views booklet was shared with the group. The Young People welcomed the changes and agreed to be further consulted after the initial pilot

9.0 Review of last year's priority areas for improvement and action

- 9.1 To improve participation of children and young people in their Reviews by further promoting Mind of My Own (MOMO) and through the development of other means of participation, in consultation with the Children in Care Council
Partially completed- use of MOMO is improving and the service is working with CICC and the social work teams on a project to make reviews more child friendly.
- 9.2 To improve the timeliness of Reviews
Completed- performance has improved, though continues to be monitored
- 9.3 To improve parental participation in Reviews and improve performance monitoring in this area.

Partially completed- A new consultation form has been developed and performance monitoring has been implemented, however, further work is need to determine whether parental participation has improved.

10.0 Priorities for 2018 – 2019

- 10.1 To further develop means by which children can participate in reviews, including MOMO and implement new model for reviews which is more child friendly.
- 10.2 To improve participation and consultation arrangements for children and carers where children are placed for adoption.
- 10.3 To demonstrate improved parental participation in Reviews.

11.0 Conclusion

- 11.1 This report has highlighted the work of the IROs in Wolverhampton from April 2017 to March 2018 and is an update on the last annual report.
- 11.2 The service needs to continue working to improve child, parental and carer participation and consultation.
- 11.3 The next report will cover the period from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.