

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

**ADULT AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES
CABINET MEMBER**

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS SERVICE
FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN
2010 - 2011**

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval of the annual report of the Independent Reviewing Officers service for Looked After Children from 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 The Government published new regulations and statutory guidance to improve the quality and consistency of care planning, placement and case review for looked after children in March 2010. This followed the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and the prior Care Matters agenda. These regulations and guidance, accompanying this new Act, have become the Government's implementation plan by the Department for Education to see through a revision programme for looked after children. The IRO Handbook is one of a suite of new regulations and statutory guidance, which was implemented on 1st April 2011. This suite has revised the statutory guidance accompanying the Children Act 1989.
- 2.2 The IRO Handbook provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to looked after children. It also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in establishing an effective IRO service. The aim is to give all looked after children the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential and to achieve improved outcomes for children. It replaces the Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance: Adoption and Children Act 2002 (effective from September 2004) which supported the Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2004 that introduced IRO's on a statutory basis.
- 2.3 The IRO Handbook states that the IRO manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent

action is needed. In addition the IRO Handbook specifies a further six areas that an annual report should cover and these are outlined in the full report.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 The Independent Reviewing Officers Service Annual Report for Looked After Children 2010/11 is attached (Appendix 1). The report makes reference to the areas outlined in the IRO Handbook for inclusion in an annual report. Therefore, the report does not have options for consideration and is information based with good practice and further development areas outlined.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

4.1 There are no options for analysis as this report is to provide information.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

5.1 There are no resource implications at this time.

6. OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 - CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)

6.1 There are no other implications to be considered.

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION

7.1 The annual report (Appendix 1) refers to the range of consultations and outcomes relating to the Independent Reviewing Officers service.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 That Cabinet Member approves the IRO Annual Report 2010/11.

DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICE

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Date: 12 July 2011

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report: N/A

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT
FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN**

April 2010 - March 2011

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Government published new regulations and statutory guidance to improve the quality and consistency of care planning, placement and case review for looked after children in March 2010. This followed the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and the prior Care Matters agenda. These regulations and guidance, accompanying this new Act, have become the Government's implementation plan by the Department for Education to see through a revision programme for looked after children. The IRO Handbook is one of a suite of new regulations and statutory guidance, which was implemented on 1st April 2011. This suite has revised the statutory guidance accompanying the Children Act 1989.
- 1.2 The IRO Handbook provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to looked after children. It also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in establishing an effective IRO service. The aim is to give all looked after children the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential and to achieve improved outcomes for children. It replaces the Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance: Adoption and Children Act 2002 (effective from September 2004) which supported the Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2004 that introduced IRO's on a statutory basis.
- 1.3 The IRO Handbook states that the IRO manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed. In addition the IRO Handbook specifies a further six areas that an annual report should make reference to and all of these are outlined in this report as follows:-
- Continuity of employment and the make up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;
 - Development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, number of reviews that are held on time, the

number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;

- Extent of participation of children and their parents;
- Outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews;
- Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and it should include an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;
- Whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children;
- Good practice, and
- Issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed.

1.4 The IRO Handbook also states that the annual report should be available as a public document and that it would be good practice to publish this on the local authority's website so that looked after children can easily access their corporate parent's assessment of the quality of its parenting.

1.5 Although the IRO Handbook was implemented on 1st April 2011, it will be used to overview the work of the IRO Service from April 2010 to March 2011.

2. OVERVIEW AND OUTCOMES

This section of the report will give an overview in relation to the areas outlined in the introduction, focusing on the key outcomes for children and young people who are looked after by North Lincolnshire.

2.1 **Development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving**

2.2 There were 164 children/young people in full-time care at March 2011. In addition, there were 33 children in short-break care and 24 young people aged 16 and 17 years olds who were formerly placed in accommodation under Section 20 and "relevant" care leavers, living in independence, with pathway plans. All of these children and young peoples care and pathway plans were being reviewed by IRO's. The average IRO caseload was 74 cases comprising of approximately 55 children in full-time care, 11 children receiving a series of short breaks and 8 "relevant" young people/care leavers aged 16/17 years, formerly Section 20 with pathway plans. The IRO average caseload remained almost the same for 2010/11 compared to 2009/10 when the average caseload was 73 cases.

- 2.3 The 3 full-time IRO's were based in the Independent Reviewing Service and managed by the Service Manager (Independent Review) falling under the Head of Safeguarding. The service remained situated within Specialist Services as part of the Children and Young People's Service.
- 2.4 The independence of the IRO is essential to enable effective challenge of any poor practice. The Regulations do not prescribe the position of the IRO within the local authority but do prescribe the minimum levels of independence. These are that the IRO must not be:-
- A person involved in preparing the child's care plan or the management of the child's case;
 - The representative of the local authority appointed to visit the child;
 - The child's personal advisor;
 - A person with management responsibilities for any of the above; and
 - A person with control over the resources allocated to the case.
- 2.5 The IRO manager should have the independence and ability to support the IRO in their core functions, tasks and responsibilities to each individual looked after child.
- These prescribed minimum levels of independence are met in North Lincolnshire.
- 2.6 There have been no changes in the staffing make up of the IRO Service since 2009/10, which has created consistency of the same IRO for children and young people. The Service Manager's role was extended from early 2010 to encompass the management of child protection conference chairs. This has been advantageous in providing the foundations for greater consistency for children who move from being subject of a child protection plan to becoming looked after. Further developing this consistency, an unbureaucratic and single planning process will however take place during 2011/12.
- 2.7 In respect of the IRO's competencies and qualifications, referred to in the IRO Handbook, they are all qualified, registered and experienced social workers, as is the Service Manager. They have extensive experience of communicating and working with children and young people. They have knowledge about what makes for good quality practice in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and a working understanding of the relevant legal processes. The IRO's have a thorough understanding of the legal

framework relating to looked after children and care leavers and the team are working, alongside colleagues, to put into practice the whole suite of new care planning and reviewing guidance and regulations implemented on 1st April 2011.

- 2.8 In respect of the team's collective knowledge of diversity and children's identity, the staff team have backgrounds in working with disabled children and children with Special Educational Needs, children who have suffered significant harm from abuse and neglect and children with attachment difficulties, both as looked after children and children subject to child protection and child in need plans living in the community. The team continues to further enhance their knowledge in respect of children from Black and Minority Ethnic groups to ensure their individual needs are fully considered during reviewing.
- 2.9 **Number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time**
- 2.10 As the table below indicates the looked after children reviews held within timescale for 2010/11 was 99.3% for children in full-time care. The shortfall from 100% was due to one child's case being reviewed a few days after the prescribed timescale, with a reasonable explanation for this occurrence. For three years prior to this looked after children reviews, held within timescale for children/young people in full-time care was 100%. It is the fifth successive year that this has been 98% or above. The statistical neighbour and England comparators have been exceeded in the past 6 years. This reflects an effective system and the high importance given to the timely reviewing of care plans. There were 480 reviews for children/young people in full-time care during the year, compared to 479 last year.
- 2.11 For children/young people in short-break care 100% of reviews were held within timescale compared to 100% last year. This year there were a total of 118 reviews compared to 133 in 2009/10.
- 2.12 This demonstrates an effective IRO service including the necessary administration.

2.13 Percentage of Looked After Children that had Statutory Reviews within timescale

	31/03/06	31/03/07	31/03/08	31/3/09	31/3/10	31/3/11
%Mainstream reviews on time	92%	98.1%	100%	100%	100%	99.3%
%Short break reviews on time	N/a	N/a	N/a	99%	100%	100%

2.14 Extent of participation of children and their parents

The IRO has key statutory duties to:-

- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations, for example to ensure that children have been informed of their rights, including how to make a complaint.

2.15 The IRO is responsible for making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and her/his entitlement to one. This could be a formal advocate or someone already in the child's network.

2.16 Through a range of methods, 100% of children/young people both in full-time and short break care participated in their review during the year. In cases where children have said that they did not know how to make a complaint, this has been explained to them. In cases where children or young people said that they would like an advocate or the IRO determined that this would benefit them, they have been linked to the Children and Young Person's Advocate or have nominated an advocate to support them in their review or speak on their behalf.

2.17 Parents are routinely consulted with before reviews and invited to them. In circumstances where it has not been appropriate or practicable for them to attend all or part of the review, a separate review meeting/discussion has been held with them regarding their child/young person's care plan.

2.18 In terms of feedback from children, young people and their carers in relation to the organisation and conduct of reviews this is outlined in the section below as part of the IRO Service quality assurance

process to ensure an effective quality service, yet also reflects the value placed upon the participation of children and their parents and how their views are responded to, given their feedback.

- 2.19 **Outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews**
- 2.20 There is routine management oversight into the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews. The Service Manager allocates cases to IRO's daily and audits the administrative arrangements of reviews weekly and monthly to ensure written consultations and invitations are sent out within 10 working days of the review.
- 2.21 There has been written consultation prior to a review with all children, young people, their parents/carers, school/pre-school, Specialist Nurse for looked after children and any other relevant adults in all cases. In almost all cases these consultation documents have been sent out at least ten working days before the review and earlier around school holidays to capture school views. In the event that a significant change has been proposed to a child's care plan, a review has been held to best match the child's timescale, for example at short notice in care proceedings, yet consultation with the child, their parents and relevant others has been upheld.
- 2.22 In terms of the conduct of reviews, there has been thorough pre-review consultation yet the review as a child-centred meeting has been consistently evidenced during management oversight, including during supervision of IRO's and reading review records.
- 2.23 In some cases IRO's have offered children and young people a discussion in private prior to their review, subject to age and understanding. It is acknowledged that from 1st April 2011 that this is a requirement. In some cases, a formal pre-meeting has not been necessary, for example where the IRO and child/young person have already established a relationship, their placement remained stable and there were no significant changes planned for the foreseeable future. In some cases the IRO had made telephone contact with the child to establish their wishes and feelings prior to their review. For babies and younger children, it is not always necessary or appropriate to see the child alone. In these cases the IRO has observed the child or used methods of play to establish their wishes, feelings and understanding.
- 2.24 The post review views for children/young people and their parents are shown below for April 2010 to March 2011. This regular feedback about the conduct of reviews from the perspective of children, young people and parents and is overseen by the IRO

after the review who makes any necessary response or changes to the individual child's benefit when issues are raised. The Service Manager oversees the collation of this feedback and completes a quarterly evaluation of all review views. The key messages are turned into service planning to ensure a continual responsive and effective service, taking account of the influences of children, young people and their parents/carers views.

- 2.25 The feedback is highly positive from children, young people and their parents as can be seen on the graphs below.
- 2.26 Children and young people fed back that they were given time to speak to their IRO in 94% of cases and thought that they were able to give their views in 96% of cases. 99% said that the right people were invited to their review. Over 90% said that they understood what had been agreed, in terms of care planning for them, were happy with what was planned and knew how to make a complaint. In terms of whether the date, time and place of the review being to their liking, 81% agreed with all three of these criteria.
- 2.27 A very few children and young people said that they were not given time to speak with their IRO before their review and this was addressed with the IRO's. Mainly this was due to the young person declining the offer or joining the review meeting after it had started. The service had made sure that children's views, wishes and feelings and rights are considered at reviews, through other means where they have been unable to talk with them prior to the review, for example by meeting with them after the review or offering the Children and Young Person's Advocate to meet with them.
- 2.28 A very small minority of children and young people said that they were not able to give their views. The IRO's talked further with these few young people and in most cases they perceived that they had not given their view, if the aim of their care plan was different to what they wished it to be.
- 2.29 A very small minority of young people were unhappy with the aim of their care plan. The IRO ensured that their wishes were considered yet the individual young people's wishes were not decisive in their own right and can be decisive only as part of an assessment of the child's needs and an overall judgement about the type of accommodation that will meet their needs. The Dyson judgement outlines that the child's wishes and feelings are not the sole factor in making a decision for a child/young person and that their best interests must be considered.
- 2.30 A very few children and young people said that they did not know how to make a complaint and in all cases were given a leaflet and

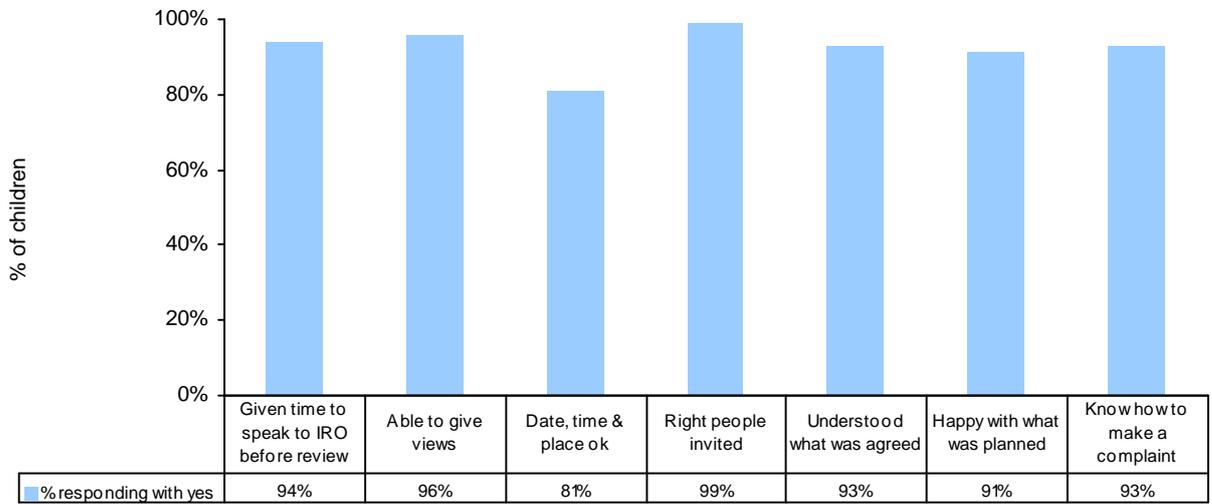
the process was explained again. All children and young people are sent a complaints leaflet when they become looked after and the process is explained by the IRO, yet some children perceived that they did not know how it worked. IRO's have heightened awareness to ensuring an understanding of this process.

- 2.31 All children and young people who wished to be linked to the Children and Young Person's Advocate were referred and subsequently seen by her.
- 2.32 Likewise the feedback from parents following their child or young persons review is also highly positive, indeed 100% of parents understood what was agreed for their child/young person in terms of care planning and 98% felt able to give views during the review.
- 2.33 There were two main themes. A very small minority of parents were unhappy with the care planning for their child. Firstly, this related to parents where timely assessment work was ongoing yet planning was in progress to actively twin-track permanent alternative care. Secondly, a very small number of parents said that they did not know how to make a complaint. The written consultation form sent to parents now incorporates how to make a complaint. Complaints forms are always sent to parents at the start of the reviewing process and further explanations are given at reviews or at other times, if necessary.

2.34

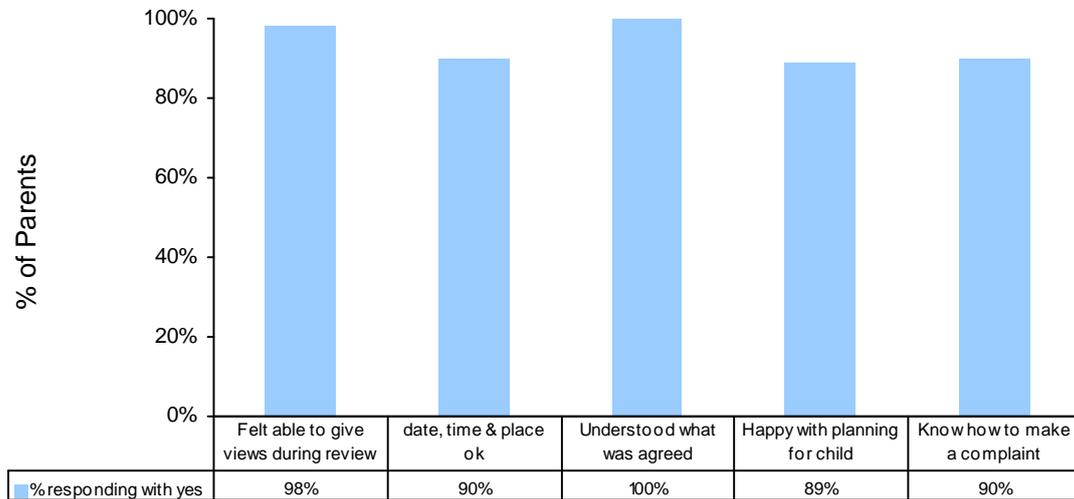
Children and Young People's Views

68 forms returned between 1 April 2010 and 31 March 2011



Parent's Views

91 forms returned between 1 April 2010 and 31 March 2011



- 2.35 The IRO service routinely provides feedback, after reviews, to Senior Social Worker's and Team Manager's about the plans for children/young people, reports for reviews and practices of care planning via Quality Assurance Practice Monitoring forms.
- 2.36 **Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes**
- 2.37 The Care Planning Dispute Resolution Policy and process within North Lincolnshire has been updated to comply with new 2010 regulations and guidance. A key function of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. Within North Lincolnshire IRO's have established positive and constructive working relationships with social workers and their managers. However, they are all experienced social workers and authoritative professionals who can provide a critical perspective and challenge, if necessary. Likewise, this is applicable at the level of Service Management within Specialist Services. The IRO will work with the local authority Complaints Officer and Children's Advocate where necessary.
- 2.38 In very few cases the IRO had raised an issue relating to care planning. Where this related to the implementation of a decision relating to the care plan, the IRO had set a remedial timescale and monitored the action to successful completion. In these very few cases the resolution of all issues had been reached informally at the level of IRO/social worker and their manager, which is stage one of the Care Planning Dispute Resolution Policy. These few matters were resolved in a timescale to meet the child's needs. Solutions had been expedited in all cases with no cases being taken up to the level of senior management. There has been no referral to Cafcass.
- 2.39 **Any resource issues putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children**
- There are no resource issues having such an affect.
- 2.40 The Children and Young People in Care Strategy 2011 – 2013 and the Priority Action Plan 2011 – 2012 contain the strategic priorities that are actively being pursued to ensure a quality service for all looked after children.

2.41 Good practice

All cases, except one case, have been reviewed in accordance with the 2004 regulations and guidance, which remained in force until 31st March 2011, the end of this annual report's coverage. This timely and effective reviewing of children and young people's care plans has underpinned the work and commitment of social workers to ensure that care planning has remained on track to meet the progress goals for children and young people.

2.42 Highly effective practice has been demonstrated by social workers in some instances. Care plans have consistently addressed permanency by the child or young person's second review.

2.43 Social workers in North Lincolnshire are developed through training and supervision to be skilled, capable and knowledgeable, in relation to the key skills necessary in working with looked after children, such as court skills, attachment, life story work and preparing reports for the adoption panel.

2.44 There is a clear risk assessment model for application to children and young people who are admitted into care. This is taken through into the matching process.

2.45 As outlined above, the feedback from children and young people is that they understand the planning for them, which is an evidence base for the highly effective practice of social workers.

2.46 There is high quality participation of looked after children and young people at the individual, service and strategic levels which continues to be an outstanding feature. The views and voices of looked after children and young people in North Lincolnshire are actively sought through many methods during their time in care and after they have left care. During 2010/2011 a Children in Care and Care Leavers Participation Report has been produced quarterly outlining general events and activities involving children and young people and their key messages from the array on participation methods such as the work of the Children in Care Council, Children's Homes Children's Meetings, the Quarterly Question (asked at statutory visits), Review Views (outlined above in this report) and Exit Interviews (for children/young people changing placements or leaving care). This document outlines a vast amount of participation information gathered in numerous ways from children and young people that is turned into service planning. A similar child and young person friendly newsletter called The Upd8 – The Lowdown Newsletter feeds back key service improvements made, reflecting the voices of children in care and care leavers in North Lincolnshire. This is a great achievement by colleagues

across Specialist Services within the local authority working with children in care. The newsletters show how central and important the participation of children and young people are to practice and service delivery and the responsiveness, difference and improvements made due to their views. This is taken further in that the Director of Children's Services and senior managers hold creative conversations with the Children in Care Council and in this way children and young people have the opportunity to be involved and have their views, experiences and ideas considered in key strategic processes.

- 2.47 The Participation Officer within the service has remained as the lead officer supporting the Children in Care Council who have maintained a clear link with the Director, senior managers, as outlined above, the IRO's and Service Manager.
- 2.48 The Children and Young People's Plan 2010-13 and the Priority Action Plan 2011/12 for Children in Care underpin the values, clear vision and ambition, prioritisation and the strategies that continue to focus the work with children and young person in care and care leavers. This has been communicated to staff through a number of events and conversations. Elected members and senior officers across the council and its partners refreshed the pledge to children in care and care leavers in early 2011. A Corporate Parenting group chaired by the Lead Member for children, including representative young people from the Children in Care Council, was proactive in ensuring the needs of children and young people in care and care leavers were met and given high priority during 2010/2011.
- 2.49 The IRO Service, alongside colleagues within Social Work Services, has incrementally prepared for the implementation of the new 2010 regulations and guidance during this reporting period, prior to its implementation on 1st April 2011. The implementation of the IRO Handbook and indeed the whole spine of the new statutory guidance and regulations, into practice, through updating and revision of procedures, policies and protocols and through staff training has been extremely well managed across the local authority with substantial joint working across service areas. The majority of procedural, policy and protocol work had been achieved by the end of March 2011 with some work planned for the first quarter of 2011/2012 to finalise this large revision. New plans and records have been developed for the Carefirst electronic case file system and were implemented on 1st April 2011. BAAF facilitated training to staff on the new regulations and guidance in February and March 2011. The IRO Service Manager and two managers from the case management team for children in care attended the DFE training on the regulations and guidance in March 2011 and

this was disseminated to managers within Specialist Services later in the month.

2.50 Issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed

There is no urgent action needed.

2.51 Over 2011/2012 the key area for further development is for the Independent Reviewing service to embed the IRO Handbook in practice. The service will implement a programme of audits to ensure compliance with the IRO Handbook. This will include continued regular and routine feedback from children, young people and parents and auditing of case and review records. Due to the new requirement in the IRO Handbook this will be extended to feedback from social workers and direct observation of IRO's. The auditing will ensure that children and young people are provided with opportunities to have their say and influence their plans that affect them, including through a pre-review meeting or discussion and that they are provided with independent advocacy or an advocate from their own network and access to trusted adults. This will incorporate children and young people having comprehensive care plans, including a plan for permanence with support through life transitions into early adulthood and evidence of progression to meet expected outcomes.

2.52 The service will continue to support the Children in Care Council to further improve services for children in care and care leavers by the continued development of consultation, participation and feedback processes to ensure that children and young people are involved, understand planning for them and that they feel safer. The service, alongside colleagues who work with children and young people in care and care leavers, will also continue to demonstrate effectiveness and further development through being responsive to the child and young persons voice.

Annex 1 – Summary of the new 2010 Regulations and Guidance and key areas of Change

The Government issued new statutory guidance for local authorities and IRO's in March 2010 on care planning and reviewing arrangements for looked after children, which was implemented on 1st April 2011. The IRO Handbook provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to looked after children. It also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in establishing an effective IRO service. The aim is to give all looked after children the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential and to achieve improved outcomes for children. It replaces the 2004 guidance, Independent Reviewing Officers guidance: Adoption and Children Act 2002, which introduced IRO's on a statutory basis.

The IRO Handbook was issued as part of a suite of statutory guidance which set out how local authorities should carry out the full range of responsibilities in relation to care planning, placement and review for looked after children. Namely, the guidance includes:

- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (March 2010) which accompanies the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (England) 2010
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers (2010)
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations – Local authority responsibilities towards former looked after children in custody (November 2010)
- Short breaks: Statutory guidance on how to safeguard and promote the welfare of disabled children using short breaks (March 2010)
- Sufficiency Statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for LAC (March 2010)

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 that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations, for example to ensure that children have been informed of their rights, including how to make a complaint.

A child/young persons care plan is prepared before they are placed in care or if this is not practicable, within 10 working days of the start of the placement. As a minimum regulatory requirement, a review of the child's care plan should take place within 20 working days, 3 months after the first review and thereafter within

6 months. Where there is a need for significant changes to a child/young person's care plan then the date of the review should be brought forward. No significant change to the care plan can be made unless it has been considered at a review, unless this is not reasonably practicable.

In discharging these duties, the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities which include:

- promoting the voice of the child
- ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up-to-date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs
- identifying any gaps in the assessment process or provision of service
- making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one
- offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for looked after children and the delivery of services to them
- monitoring the activity of the responsible authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands the implications of any changes made to his/her care plan

The key changes to the role and function of the IRO in the broadest sense are:

- when a child first becomes looked after that a named IRO will be appointed. The intention is that this should enable continuity in the oversight of their case and to enable the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child.
- an extension of the IRO monitoring role from monitoring the local authority's performance of its functions in relation to the child's review to monitoring such performance in relation to the child's case. The intention is to give the IRO a more effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected.
- for the IRO to ensure that the local authority give due consideration to any views expressed by the child. This is intended to reinforce the duty to give consideration to the child's wishes and feelings when making any decision in respect of them.
- a new flexibility for the IRO to adjourn review meetings if these would be unproductive due to a lack of key documentation.
- that the IRO must speak in private with each child prior to each review to personally establish their wishes and feelings of the issues to be covered. This is intended to ensure that the child is properly consulted on matters relating to their care and can contribute to the content of their review meeting.
- that a referral by an IRO to Cafcass can be considered at any time and not as a last resort. The intention is to reinforce the authority to challenge poor practice around the child's case.

The guidance also outlines other IRO duties in relation to planning transition to adulthood throughout a child's care and in relation to specific groups of children, for example, children receiving short breaks, children with additional communication needs or who are within the youth justice system.

There are additional provisions within the guidance, for example, for the local authority to have a system in place that provides its IRO's with access to independent legal advice.

More detailed and tighter processes are outlined to ensure that the IRO is kept fully informed of the progress of the child's case in care proceedings. The guidance refers to close liaison with Cafcass/Children's Guardians and with the local authority legal section, plus submission of review reports to the court. The IRO continues to have a key function in the dispute resolution process to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process.

The role and functions of the IRO manager are prescribed, which in summary include providing oversight, professional advice and management support to each IRO, ensuring the quality of service delivery, ensuring regular and routine feedback from parents, children and social workers, auditing records and direct observation of IRO's, contributing to the effective arrangements for looked after children to communicate with senior managers, ensuring that the size of IRO caseloads enables them to comply with primary legislation, regulations and guidance and the writing of an annual report for the scrutiny of the corporate parenting board.

There are two key areas of change as follows:-

Firstly, a key statutory implication from this guidance relates to the significant strengthening of the ongoing monitoring of the child's progress by the IRO, which brings with it the potential of more reviews to change a child's care plan. Reviews will have to be convened in certain circumstances, for example where there is a proposal for a child to leave care before the age of 18, for a child to move from a regulated to an unregulated setting, where their change of placement would interrupt their Key Stage 4 education or where a settled child will move placement. In addition, reviews will have to be considered due to other major significant changes, for example, to a child's contact, if they make a complaint or due to offending or being missing. There may be additional consultation work with children as the IRO should consult with the child, where appropriate, and take their views into account when considering significant changes/events in the child's life.

Secondly, a key implication is the delivery of a greater range of functions by IRO's, whilst the management of their caseloads is ensured to comply with primary legislation, regulations and guidance and to provide a continued quality of service to children and an overall effective IRO service.