

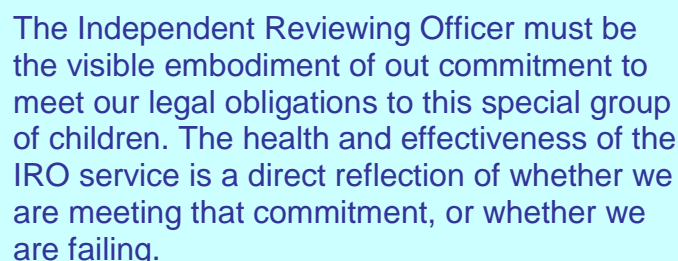
# Dudley IRO Annual Report 2014 to March 2015

## *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.

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 Independent Reviewing services and outlines a number of important recommendations. This report will therefore summarise the learning achieved, identify improvements better outcomes to achieve, but also celebrate good practice across the service. 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 Independent Reviewing services and outlines a number of important recommendations. The foreword was written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; in it he makes the following comment



The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing.

The annual report is a requirement under the Care Planning, Placement and Care Review (England) Regulations 2010, which state 'the IRO manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting board'. Therefore, this report relates to the period from the 1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015 and will reflect not only the achievements made within the Independent Reviewing service in Dudley, but also the challenges and changes needed to improve the service for 2015/ 16.

**This report is set out under the following headings based upon the requirements of the statutory IRO handbook (2010):**

- *The context for the work of IROs in Dudley*
- *The development of the Independent Reviewing service during this period (including capacity and caseloads)*
- *The quality assurance of LAC Reviews (including timeliness of reviews)*
- *The dispute resolution process and an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes*
- *The extent of participation in LAC Reviews*
- *Challenges faced by the service*
- *Recommendation for future development*

### **Context**

Whilst the Care Planning, Placement and Review Regulations 2010 sets out how Local Authorities and their partners should fulfil their responsibilities with regard to care planning, placement and review for Looked After Children, it remains underpinned by the Working Together 2010 and 2013 guidance and the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Handbook (hereafter referred to as 'the Guidance'). This underpins the crucial role of the IRO to promote and enable young people to have a voice, promote their independency, but equally to direct and support services.

The primary task for Dudley IRO's is to ensure the care plan for the young person fully reflects and promotes their global needs to achieve the most positive outcome. Although care planning underpins, promotes and should be consistent with the Local Authority's legal responsibilities towards the child, 'it is the child's meeting'. However, effective planning and review is underpinned by thorough assessment of the child and making the right decisions at the right time on when these will be achieved. It should be clear, reflect strengths and achievements of the child, but also remain active and live.

As the voice of the child, the IRO will consider decision making that promotes a stable and a consistent level of care that is both sensitive and appropriate to the individual. It must promote them to flourish, achieve and reach their full potential and where possible, this should be in conjunction with the parent's views. Where planning or delay takes place, The Guidance states that it is the responsibility of each Local Authority to have a formal escalation process for the IRO to raise concerns; this must be respected and prioritised by practitioners and managers alike.

### **What are we doing about it?**

- *IRO's continue to prioritise statutory reviews take place within the required timeframes.*
- *Monitoring and audit processes have continued to develop and ensured that cases are effectively progressed to achieve better outcomes for the children.*
- *Discussion and review takes place with all internal teams on the achievements, concerns and developments needed to improve the services and outcomes for looked after children.*

### **How does the IRO make a difference in Dudley?**

- *They actively promote the child's voice and participation within meetings and ensure that they are at the centre of and included within all decision making. This requires that the child is seen before the review to ascertain their views or opinions, but equally developing a consistent relationship with the young person.*
- *They will ensure the child not only understands how an advocate could support this process, but also signposting and promoting the use of this.*
- *Whilst chairing the child's review and monitoring the progress of the case on a frequent and continuous basis, they ensure it takes place on time and where information or decisions are shared effectively for professionals to act upon.*
- *They will ensure that plans and decisions are based on a detailed and informed assessment which is up-to-date, effective and live. This prevents 'drift or delay' in respect of permanency and holding professionals to account.*
- *Where appropriate, they use the escalation process (Rag system) to highlight the shortfalls, needs of the young people.*

### **Professional Profile of the Independent Reviewing service**

Within the current organisational structure, the Independent Reviewing service is placed under the Safeguarding Unit of the People's Directorate and based at Corbyn Road, Dudley. Direct line management for the IROs falls under the Service manager (IRO manager). They will in turn report to the Head of Service within safeguarding and the chief social worker. In common with many other parts of the country, the service retains the responsibility for independently chairing Child Protection Conferences (CPCs) and all our IRO's are experienced senior social workers/ social work managers and are registered with the Health & Care Professions Council. This continues to strengthen the effectiveness and planning on improving practice/ performance, whilst ensuring consistency in care planning, consultation and participation of LAC across all agencies.

The team composition consists of 6.28 FTE for IROs and one (FTE) Service Manager. There is also 1 FTE LADO officer and 2 FTE audit officers. Four of the FTE IRO posts were funded from the Troubled Families Funding and Children's Services budget and since April 2014, one FTE IRO has been recruited. The IRO manager, LADO officer the 2 FTE audit positions are currently held by interim practitioners. However, the value and experience these individuals bring to the service will enable, develop and promote good practice throughout the organisation. It will also inform our ambitions for 2015-16 in relations to the high quality of services Dudley children will receive. Whilst the majority of young people have experienced continuity of the same IRO throughout their time in care, due to changes when some IROs left the service, this created additional challenges and a small number of young people have experienced changes. Since April 2014, staff composition has changed when one FTE IRO left the service, one 0.5 IRO retired and one other FTE IRO reduced their hours from FTE to 3 days per week.

Whilst the current IRO manager post remains vacant and additional staffing capacity has been met via the use of 3 interim IROs, ongoing recruitment is taking place to ensure a permanent workforce will be recruited. The job evaluation for the IRO in terms of grade (team manager) has been resubmitted so that it is consistent with other Local Authorities and the service can retain current staff and attract high quality candidates. Whilst in March 2015, the Independent Reviewing service had 1.80 IRO vacancies, the increase in demand of both LAC and child protection cases have led to some capacity issues. A business case was been submitted to increase the capacity of the service for additional FTE IROs which will reduce caseloads to around 75 children per one FTE IRO, but also ensure and promote better outcomes. The key objective remains to develop and embed a performance and development culture within the service.

An active campaign is planned to recruit a more permanent workforce. Dudley aims to recruit a permanent Independent Reviewing service Manager in addition to the IROs. Similar to other Local Authorities, there remains a shortfall of available skilled and experienced IRO's. The current staffing position of the team means that we have 4 interim IRO's and 5 permanent IRO's. In respect of addressing the current challenges within the workforce, consideration to applicants for the IRO must fulfil the role and responsibilities to the highest standard and we continue to investigate how applicants can enable the service to reflect our LAC population and support Dudley to achieve all of our ambitions for young people.

**In terms of diversity we have a mix of male and female IROs. We have:**

- A balance between male and female IROs
- 4 IRO's from a BME background
- 2 IRO's that participate within other forums such as the fostering panel
- Professional expertise that reflects diverse experience of diversity and cultural understanding of the local population

**IRO manager**

The management role function over the last year has remained generally the same with attendance and active participation at Resource panel and other critical meetings. Some additional expertise and chairing of complex meetings has been incorporated in this role such as chairing and reviewing secure panel meetings and development of the role into areas of auditing, training and development for professional practice. Essentially, the function of providing direct operational line management support and decision making to IRO's and frequent supervision to the IRO's, remains as one of the key roles for the post. This enables and supports the Independent Reviewing service to contribute to discussion and developments within social work practice and subsequently improve the outcomes and services for our young people. The IRO manager supports and participates in training and development within the service but also has a key role in managing and resolving disputes alongside dealing with service user complaints in a timely manner. These are shared within the service to consider some of the key messages from young people and other key individuals to consider learning for the future.

**What are we doing about it?**

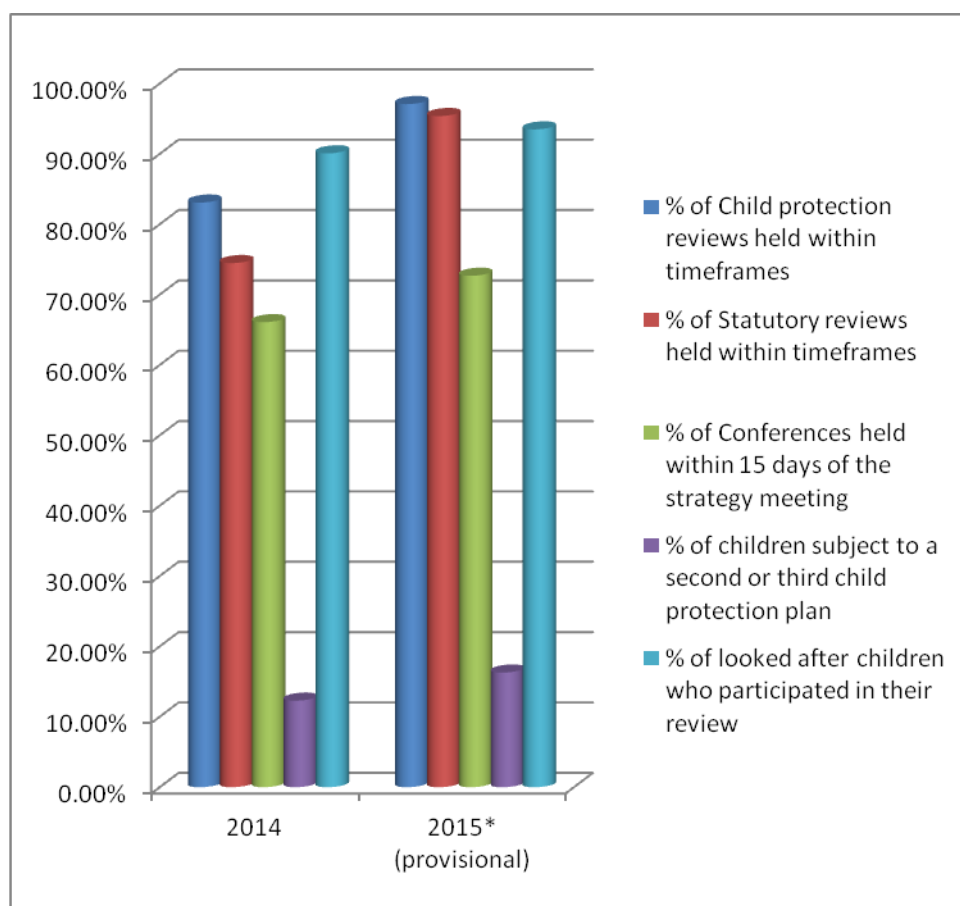
- *Our objective remains with developing a permanent workforce of IRO's.*
- *To recruit and establish a permanent workforce which will provide a high level of consistency and stability for Dudley children, but also reduced the current overspend within the service.*
- *recruit and establish a permanent IRO Manager*
- *IRO's to develop and perform additional roles that support improvement within the organisation, develop practice and strengthen workforce development and relationships. For example, supporting multi/ single agency training, contributing to the newly qualified social worker training.*
- *IRO's will continue to actively participate within other forums such as the fostering panel, case file audit groups.*
- *Continue to share learning, supporting organisational development and provide advice or consultation to others*

## Quantitative information about the Independent Reviewing service

Since 2014, Dudley and the Independent Reviewing service have embarked on a journey to improve the services for young people, but also demonstrate strong and evidence based practice. Review of the current IT system and develop of improved templates regarding minutes, report formats for example is planned or being implemented. This will increase and improved our use of electronic recording systems and appropriately increased the need for IRO's to be more accountable in recording their work or involvement in the child's journey. In addition, this will enable and support more effective scrutiny and accountability for all professionals in evidencing what difference intervention made or how effective the plan or decisions were. Ongoing scrutiny and challenge will be undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness and monitor cases where delay has taken place.

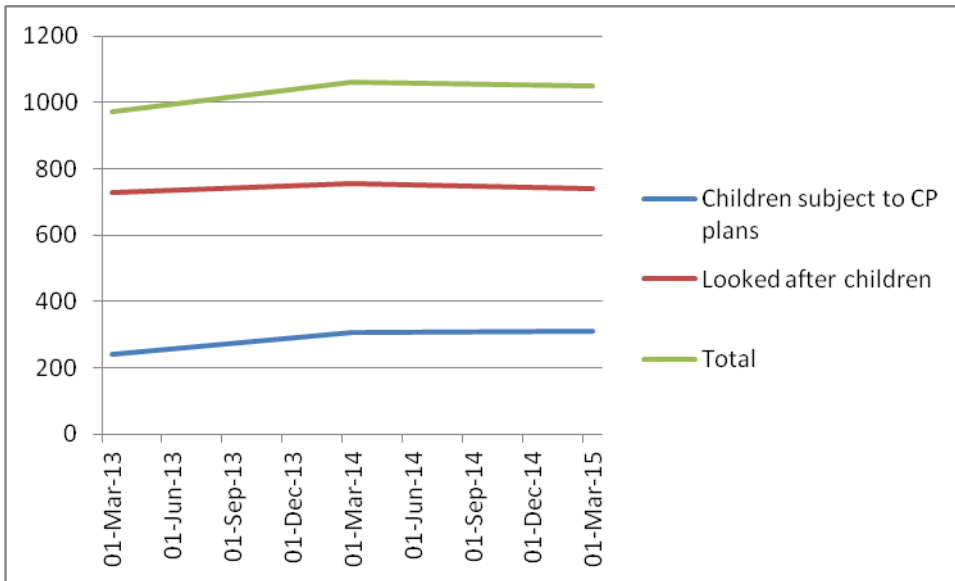
### Performance and data analysis

#### Timeliness of child protection conference and LAC reviews

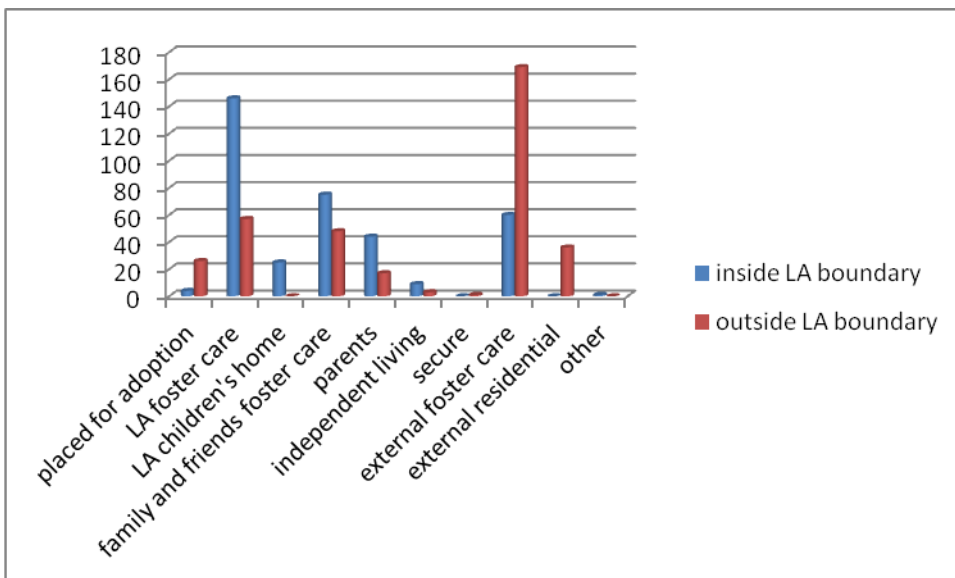


There are some process difficulties to produce the required reports that meet the specific demands of the service. CCM provides some of the key data, but some of the reports cascaded by the administrators may duplicate information. In 2015/ 16, one objective will be to produce data information and analysis that reflects evidence of performance across the service and organisation, but that can be widely shared to improve overall performance. Within 2014/ 15, it was reported that the numbers of children subject to a second child protection review plan increased, but children subject to a third period decreased. Whilst monitoring and audit processes have been introduced to ensure these cases are reviewed and an audit was undertaken on a sample of repeat child protection plans and the information has been shared in respect of the findings, further investigation is required to explore this area further.

## Amount of children looked after or subject to a child protection plan at March 2015.

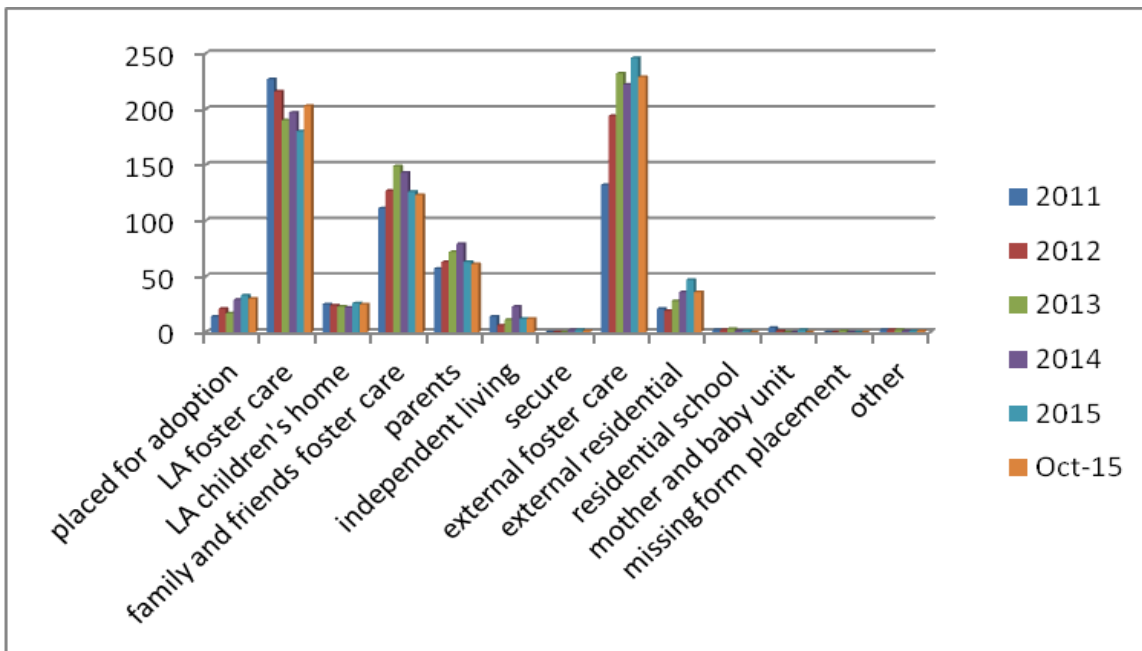


The Independent Reviewing service continues to complete reviews of all relevant children. For example, the annual review of all children placed in residential school provision. Whilst the process ensures both educational and care arrangements are considered, this requires the Independent Reviewing service to facilitate approximately 750 Child protection and Position of Trust meetings and 1663 LAC meetings. Notably, the Independent Reviewing service has started to explore not just location of placements, but what this placement was and whether it meets the child's needs. If considering aspects of geographical location for our LAC children, this could place additional demands and requirements on the service when considering around 50% of our LAC population is placed outside of Dudley

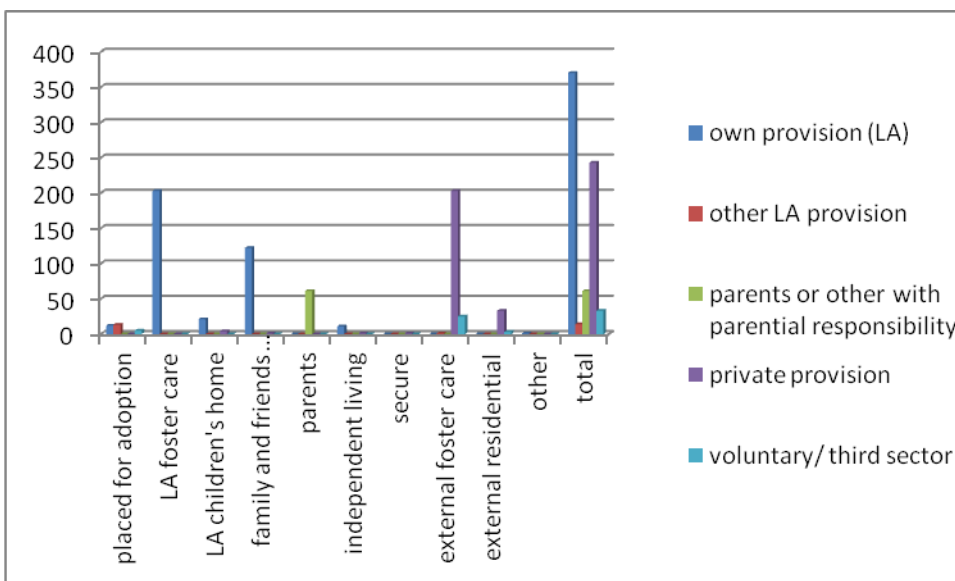


The table below provides some detail of the variation in placement type, but there is currently no heat map available to confirm the geographical location.

### Types of placements



### Providers of placement



### Quality Assurance

Feedback and reporting continues through IRO's completing quality assurance monitoring forms after each review and sharing these with the social worker and Team manager. This has informed practice, but also provided key information regarding quarterly performance against national and local performance indicators. Monitoring forms are used by the Independent Reviewing service to highlight on any significant events or safeguarding issues. Within 2015/16, ongoing review will take place into quality and qualitative issues regarding these to ensure they are effective, but equally promote evidence of our achievements in Dudley. Whilst they are shared with the social worker after each review to improve knowledge and practice on each case, evidence is required to evaluate the effectiveness of the current systems in place.

## Dispute resolution process

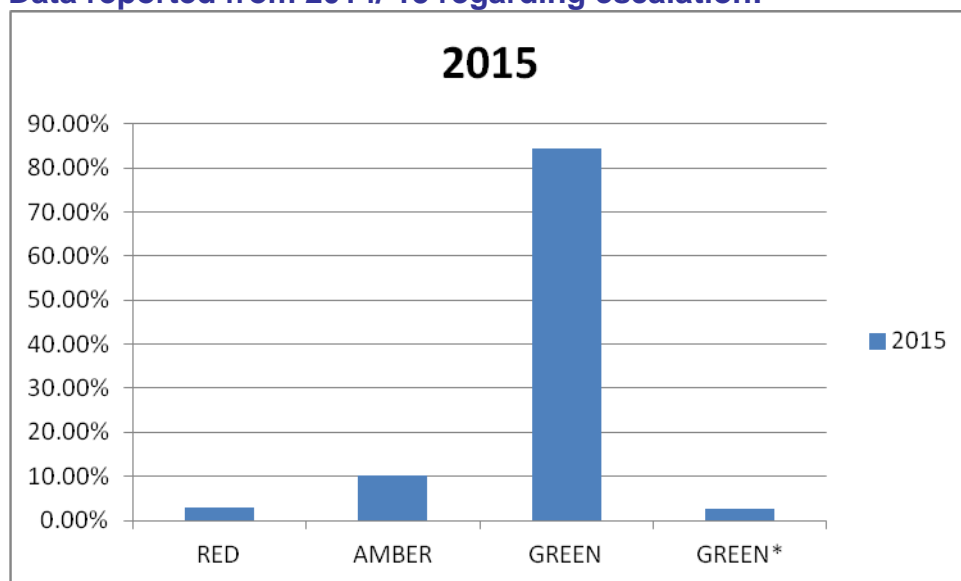
Whilst the IRO has the power to refer to CAFCASS, they need to take into account and give serious consideration to the child's wishes and feelings balanced against the human rights of the child. The internal Escalation process (Rag system) supports the IRO to raise concerns or disagreements relating to a child's care plan with the allocated social worker/ line manager in the first instance. This sets out in a clear and accountable timeframe on what action needs to be taken. Notably, there were no referrals made to Cafcass by the Independent Reviewing service between 2014 and March 2015.

All Local Authorities are required to have a formal dispute resolution process to ensure concerns regarding delay in cases will be resolved effectively and within a required timescale. Drawing on other models, Dudley implemented a systematic approach to tracking the progress of individual care plans and the identification of themes or issues emerging. The development and embedding of the Rag system continues to occur. Whilst there has been limited change in the reporting numbers from 2013 to 2014, further evaluation is planned for 2015/ 16 to explore this area further. It has been reported that progress was made in respect of the RED Rags (significant case concerns) being responded to and resolved.

The current system in place provides the following indicators:

- Red – Delay or other serious practice issues which are seriously impacting on the plan.
- Amber – Specific issue of concern in care planning but overall plan is progressing.
- Green – plan is progressing well.
- Green \* - exceptional practice in the implementation of the care plan

### Data reported from 2014/ 15 regarding escalation:



During 2014 to 2015, there have been delays in respect of social workers issuing care proceedings or in respect of permanency planning. Some of these issues have been addressed via the introduction and embedding of improved and clear process over the last year in Dudley. Whilst the chart above indicates a high level of plans progressing, this would also suggest managers are responding appropriately to concerns escalated by the IROs. However, the current escalation will be evaluated to review its effectiveness in 2015/16 but also ensure that IRO's are fulfilling their responsibilities. Whilst it presents positive in terms of quantitative data, Dudley will need to evaluate the qualitative aspects and what this means for our children within 2016



### **What are we doing about it?**

- Ongoing review and discussion regarding active feedback from IROs to social workers, Team managers (or visa versa) to address practice, specific issues or concerns in cases.
- Effective use and implementation of Dispute resolution meetings between appropriate professionals within cases to discuss and identify positive outcomes for children
- Increase and effective recording by IROs within children files to evidence and demonstrate where the IRO has made a difference, but also the voice of the child and the IRO footprint
- Before March 2016, to review the current escalation process in place, consider its effectiveness and the information/ qualitative data it provides.
- If appropriate or required, to consider and implement how the system can be improved or enhanced to maximise the outcomes for the children and organisation
- The Independent Reviewing service in consultation with other social care managers will consider and evaluate the common themes and trends emerging to tackle the issue of delay and reduce the need for resolution

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### **Capacity and allocation**

The IRO Handbook and Ofsted suggests that case loads for IROs need to be between 50 and 70. The size of caseload alone does not indicate the workload for each IRO if you consider the number of other responsibilities such as out of county placements, large family groups, children with complex needs or disabilities. Whilst statutory guidance requires local authorities to cap IRO caseloads and ensure they are able to spend individual time on a regular basis young people to ascertain their wishes/ feelings, it equally requires IROs to review progress in decision making and champion the voice of the child in terms of preventing delay. However, other requirements around the IRO role should and need to be taken into account such as the links/ discussion with the child's guardian, social worker and other key professionals to ensure the Local Authority is exercising its 'corporate parent' responsibilities.

From a capacity overview and from 2014, Dudley has observed a slight increase in the number of requests from children becoming LAC, but also in relation to Initial CPC requests. The additional issues of IRO's leaving, sickness absence and recruiting IRO's who are both experienced and good enough for our children in Dudley, has led to higher caseloads amongst the service. In practice, the balance of allocation for LAC and child protection work varies across individual IRO's but the general allocation for FTE staff are approximately 110 to 120 children. Like most other Local Authorities, child protection cases are based on family's where LAC is based on individual children. Therefore, the actual number of allocated case may not fully consider the complex issues or planning involved.

Therefore, if the guidance states that 1 FTE IRO's caseload should not exceed 70 cases, (45 LAC children and 25 child protection families for example), Dudley IROs are in excess of this amount. Within Dudley, a general FTE IRO caseload for example reflects a trend of 108 children allocated. Broadly, this equates to 77 as LAC and approximately 32 Children as child protection. The average allocation is applied across the Independent Reviewing service and may not always take into account whether the IRO is FTW and PTE. This has in part arisen due to the increase need for allocation across the service, but also Dudley being unable to recruit experienced IROs like most other Local Authorities.

The current challenges faced by the Independent Reviewing service remains with the recruitment of permanent staff and the dependency on interim agency staff. There is national wide and very competitive market to recruit strong IRO's, although Dudley is actively seeking to establish itself as a strong and competitive employer. Whilst work has taken place to advertise, recruit and establish a permanent workforce, this has not been as successful as we had hoped. Part of the challenges is ensuring suitable applicants have the required skills and expertise to take on the role and are good enough for our children. The other is retaining the IROs we have in a competitive market.

#### **What are we doing about it?**

- The plan is to reduce allocations to around 75 children per FTE IRO.
- Allocation will consider issues such as complexity, geographical location and skill/ expertise of the IRO.
- The same pro rota formula will be applied to IROs based on their contractual hours. For example, IROs that work 22 hours per week will be allocated between 35 to 40 children.
- A business case has been put forward to senior managers for the additional staffing capacity in September 2015 (5 additional IROs).
- We will consider and implement a effective caseload weighting system before March 2016
- We will actively seek and recruit a permanent workforce that will reduce the dependency on interim staff, but also promote the consistency for our young people

#### **Impact of any issue on service delivery – what helps and what is hindering?**

There is limited data information available on how many LAC children aged 16-18 was presented and was assessed by Housing and Children's Social Care under the "Southwark Judgement within Dudley. In relation to children in need of respite and/or short breaks, where services under section 20(4) Children Act 1989 apply, there has been limited information available to confirm how many children would receive this service. In relation to disabled children receiving short break/respite care under section 17(6) Children Act 1989 or where a child in need plan is required, this necessitate that reviews should be carried out at least every 6 months. Again, there is limited information available to confirm what current involvement and demand this has had on the Independent Reviewing service over the last year.

In general, there are periods where demand for the Independent Reviewing service increases such July or August (summer school break) or key holiday periods such as Christmas. This co-incides with planned leave and can place additional pressure on the Independent Reviewing service to meet demands or availability to hold either child protection or LAC reviews. At the point of writing this report, there was limited information to reflect these trends over the last two years, but it will be an area to consider in 2015/ 16. With the increase in demand for services and improving the quality of effective and efficient reviews/ practice, there will need to be investment within the Independent Reviewing service to match the current trends. Whilst the Independent Reviewing service regularly considers the frequency of meetings to ensure the best use of resources and monitors cases where children may be subject to both LAC and CPC processes, the impact of retaining current staffing will be an important factor in the future.

Whilst quarterly review and data collection are reviewed within cases where children are subject to child protection plans for longer than 15 months and the reasoning behind this questioned, the numbers of LAC at any one time are not static as children will join and leave throughout the year. For example, when they return home, are adopted or they reach the age of 18. Increased communication with professionals and families has continued to develop alongside ensuring plans for permanency are established and promoted within the court arena if the plan is for the child not to return home. Our aim for the year ahead to consider and implement strategies that will enable us to plan and consider future trends and the resources we have in place to effectively manage this.

If considering LAC specifically, the Guidance requires the local authority to carry out reviews as follows:

- The first review of a child's case within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after
- The second review no more than three months after the first
- The third and subsequent reviews no more than six months after the previous one
- Whenever the IRO directs; and
- When unplanned changes to the child's placement is required

The local authority is required to measure timeliness of reviews as a key performance indicator and this would include elements such as:

- children who are still in care at the end of the reporting period and have been for four weeks or more
- have not been placed for adoption
- they have not been made subject to a special guardianship order, residence order, or supervision order
- Their review was due to be held within the period.

Disruptions of long term placement and pre adoption placements are carried out by IROs. Where themes and learning have been observed, this has been taken forward both in feedback within the service, but also at relevant meetings such as the Resource panel. Further development and review is taking place across the organisation to consider and implement more effective services for children, but also in terms of planning, decision making and resource allocation. The Independent Reviewing service aim for 2015/ 16 are to inform and be part of these groups.

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## **Qualitative information about the Independent Reviewing service**

It is accepted and recognised that performance is still below the expectation to achieve 100%. However, performance management remains in place to drive performance up and address some of the barriers. Crucially, this alongside the need to ensure the voice of the child is heard throughout meetings and reviews remains at the centre of our work. Good practice around timeliness of reviews, permanency planning and regular dialogue between young people, IRO's, social workers and their carers between reviews is essential to ensure robust oversight and that drift in cases is eradicated.

The use of the current Rag or escalation system has promoted and could act as a two way process between all professionals and the Independent Reviewing service. Whilst on one part, it currently promotes and enables IRO's to feedback directly to managers in Dudley where there are concerns; equally others could use the same system to voice their views.

The IRO manager monitors this information and it will be discussed/ reviewed in supervision with the IRO to reflect on what difference they made and what outcome was achieved. Whilst this information provides objective quality assurance information designed to add value and improve the organisations services, it also provides an opportunity for IRO's to evidence their role in challenging practice and ensure that the Local Authority fulfils its role as Corporate Parent.

## **Personal Educational Plans (PEPs)**

The 2010 Guidance requires the Local Authority to ensure that every looked after child has an effective and high quality personal education plan (PEP), which forms the education component of the child's overall care plan. IRO's have a responsibility to ensure that every young person deemed as LAC will have a current PEP in place (within 6 months of a child or young person becoming LAC). The challenge for Dudley is to identify a means of capturing this data on a frequent basis that could present as live information. As an Independent Reviewing service, we routinely record and review this area within LAC reviews and promote the outcomes we would want for our children. The Independent Reviewing Service plans to establish stronger links with the Virtual Head teacher (VHT) and ensures that within LAC reviews, this is one of key areas addressed. IRO's will also escalate cases where PEPs are not available. This productive relationship will result with PEPs increasingly being in place and available for reviews, but they will also consider children that are NEET.

## **Health Assessments**

Dudley continues to provide good health care for LAC and monitor arrangements for the child's health care in accordance with the health plan. A registered medical practitioner undertakes the assessment of the child's state of health and provides a written report of the assessment. Health assessments continue to take place once every six months in the case of children aged under five and every 12 months in the case of children aged five and over. Our ambition is to achieve 100% to support a high level of continuity and planning in the future. Further planning and integration is planned for 2015/ 16 between the Independent Reviewing service, social care and the named nurse for LAC. This will promote an effective early warning system to ensure that all relevant young people are referred promptly; receive a service and this forms part of the review discussion. In review of the 14 years of age and above age group, we are working with health professionals to address the gap on how health assessments for older children or young people can be undertaken more successfully. This is an area of work that Dudley is aware of and further development is planned through clinical commissioning group within 2015/16.

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## **The management of children's LAC reviews**

Children are allocated to IRO's at the point of initial referral to the team. The Independent Reviewing service will endeavour to keep the same IRO allocated throughout the life of the case or in respect of sibling groups to support consistency in decision making. During the last year we achieved a high level of consistency within IRO allocation. This is important to us, as children have told us that they value having a consistent IRO. As part of the review process, all IRO's should visit the children prior to the review-taking place to ascertain their views. One of the key challenges for the IRO is how we record the meeting and promote the voice of the young person at the centre.

Although there is no current reporting data to accurately reflect where reviews took place, all IRO's will ensure the review takes place where the child is most likely to feel relaxed and comfortable, with the first consideration given to the child's placement. The primary venue would therefore be within young people's placements unless there is specific and appropriate reason for a different venue. There will be planned discussions with partner agencies regarding other venues; appropriate times etc to increase the offer for our young people to choose from. This will also improve the timing of reviews to ensure education or activities are not affected.

In review of the electronic outlook calendars from IROs within the service, this reflects a number of meetings have taken place at external venues such as schools or foster placements. Although some meetings have taken place within the office environment, this is linked to safe working and the need to engage parents. In 2015/16, the service will develop LAC reviews taking place as a sequence of meetings to engage young people more within their reviews. This will be subject to current capacity issues being decreased.

### **The level of Participation by children in their LAC Reviews**

The participation of children and young people at their reviews is an essential part of the reviewing process. Participation continues to be measured in a variety of ways such as attendance at reviews, face-to-face meetings with their IRO, conveying their views through the use of an advocate etc. For example: text messaging, telephone and written format. Young people nationally continue to say that they like to be able to use email and text as ways in which they can communicate with their IRO. As such, all IRO's are issued with mobile phones to facilitate this communication in a secure way, but also ensure that the young people, parents and professionals are able to contact them directly.

The current percentage of children and young people participating in their reviews is 95.8% (provisional figure). In 2015/ 16, the Independent Reviewing service has identified that participation is going to be a key area for service development. Development of the current process is under review and one outcome we want to achieve in 2015/ 16 are to review the themes emerging regarding care planning processes from the child's perspective. Part of the barriers to achieving a 100% may be linked to recording data on why the young person did not want to attend. For example, the minutes of a meeting will not always give a clear account of how the young person participated. Considerable work has been undertaken to accurately reflect and ensure that the quality assurance form completed after each review is correct, accurate and completed in a timely manner alongside the qualitative aspect of reflecting this within the minutes. Whilst young people have the right to refuse to participate, it remains our responsibility to maximise their participation and ensure their views and feelings are heard. We continue to explore ways in which we can improve the LAC review experience for young people and therefore support them to engage more meaningfully with the process. In addition, Dudley has implemented a consultation provision/ process with the children's society to provide advocates if the young people want to attend their conference. At this time, there is limited information to confirm how many young people have used this service.

### **What are we doing about it?**

- An information leaflet has been developed which is sent to young people prior to their review to ensure they understand the responsibilities of their IRO and how they can communicate with them.
- Young people are contributing to an update of their review consultation document.
- IROs with the young person and SWs to consider robustly the venue for the next review rather than assuming current venue is suitable/appropriate
- The plan for 2015/16 is to divide the current service so that IROs will be allocated either child protection or LAC children. This will enable a targeted and specialised group of 3 IROs to increase the child participation, but also focus on effective and SMART planning. This is planned alongside reduction of cases and an increase within the permanent workforce.

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## Support for IRO's

The IRO manager has continued to attend the regional Network Meetings. These meetings provide a wider perspective of the IRO role, up to date information on current thinking and Government policy, guidance and initiatives. The network aims to raise standards for LAC across the region and to promote consistency of practice and service provision across all agencies. Within 2015/ 16, communication will be embedded by the IRO manager and IRO's to share and pool good practice.

All IRO's receive regular and frequent formal supervision and informal sessions are provided to discuss more immediate or urgent case issues. Team meetings take place monthly and the plan for 2015/16 will be to use part of the sessions to develop training, support and case discussion further. There will be a planned service development day in November 2015 where guest speakers or judiciary will be invited to attend. In addition, there is a planned joining Cafcass/ IRO training event to be held on the 18th November 2015 whereby all regional IRO teams have been invited to attend. Over the last several months, IROs have formed part of the consultation group to consider and review the range of documents used by Dudley.

## What are we doing about it?

- Driving forward change with the development and embedding of cross agency training, networking to other IRO services
- Developing our understanding of research linked to practice, what this means for young person.
- As a service, promoting a unified and consistent approach to develop communication, high practice standards and the child's voice

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## Challenges

One of the key challenges for the year ahead, remains with the Independent Reviewing service being fully staffed by skilled experienced permanent practitioners. IRO's must ensure and further evidence their involvement, challenge of practice and the child's voice at the centre of their work. The capacity arising from increased numbers of both LAC and child protection requests over the last year has raised a number of challenges for the service. However, this is expected to level out and the embedding of stronger and evidence based practice will have greater positive impact for young people resulting in better outcomes.

Additional challenges such as the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 will enable them to make a successful transition to adulthood. There is further work and service development ongoing between all agencies to offer and provide a joined up service in relation to health, education and adult services. Equally, with the amendments of the Children Act 2010 coming into place early 2015, this will require IROs and other professionals to consider the impact of this for young people at LAC reviews.

There is ongoing review within the wider service to consider the internal organisational structural and make relevant changes. This includes areas such as improvement within quality assurance audits. The Independent Reviewing service remains mindful of the impact of such changes can have, but will continue to be robust in their overview of cases between reviews and ensure that cases do not experience drift. Equally, we form part of the changes that need to be made to ensure the service we provide, meets the required expectations from all of us within the child's life.

Other areas of development for our LAC children remain with Pathway planning and analysis based assessments. Whilst the Guidance states these must be informed by good quality assessment that involves the young person at the centre, their family and professional agencies, they must also ensure that it is aspirational and will assist the young person with the transition and contingency plans in respect of health and education. Feedback from practice and reviews has continued to highlight the need for decisions to be SMART, but also distributed within an appropriate timescale. Development and improvement has continued within the Independent Reviewing service and children services.

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## Quality Assurance of the Independent Reviewing service

The Independent Reviewing service continues to review and quality assures its practice via a number of key approaches such as:

- Case discussion and consultation between IRO's and the IRO manager
- Regular critical and reflective supervision alongside caseload management of individual IRO's
- Through the continued use of the IRO as the critical friend
- IRO manager completing practice observations and audits which are incorporated into supervision to strengthen the IRO role or challenge what needs to improve

For example, within supervision the IRO manager will dip sample case notes and minutes/decisions. Equally, review of previous actions takes place within each session to consider what difference the IRO made in the case. Evaluating the escalation records and allocations reports is also a key factor when reviewing individual and group performance along with complaints, comments and compliments. This is formally recorded within recorded supervision documents and used to inform annual Performance Development Reviews or Service development plans.

In relation to team performance and development, actions to improve the quality assurance, findings from audits and case practice will be taken forward through performance management processes and monitored through 1:1 supervision or team practice and development meetings. Ongoing audits will provide more clear evidence to improve outcomes that are focused, child centered and where the voice of the child is at the centre. As data reports evolve, this will lead to more accurate live reports being produced and monitor these improvements year on year.

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## Achievements and impact of Independent Reviewing service

*Areas for consideration include:*

- Children and young people's views – how can we capture their voice, evidence our involvement and what difference we made for the young people
- Children and young people chairing their own reviews but also the timeliness and qualitative aspects of these. For example, SMART outcomes
- Contributions and participation of partner agencies
- Quality of Care Planning and tracking and monitoring of Care Plans
- Clear management oversight and evidence of decision making

## Overview and Summary

### Recommendations for future development

#### The service objectives for 2015/16 are:

- To continue with the improvement in effective oversight and challenge, in the best interests of children and young people. To be able to evidence and support this from feedback by children, young people and their families.
- To further improve timeliness, quality and effectiveness of reviews of looked after children.
- To deliver our services in a culturally competent and personalised manner recognising the diversity of our local population.
- To ensure a high standard of evidence based practice in relation to recording, SMART outcomes and midway review of cases.
- To continue with improving relationships and developing links with Cafcass, other IRO's teams on good practice
- To continue with the development and employment of a permanent based workforce which supports the planning and support for young people, thus reducing the need for interim staff and subsequently reducing costs to the organisation.

During the next year, the Independent Reviewing Service will continue to focus upon the development of its quality assurance and practice development functions. This will include Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely (SMART) outcomes in order to more appropriately measure the impact for children and young people.

The Independent Reviewing Service will continue to work with young people and parents to promote and ensure feedback from them about the service about the service provided. This feedback will enable us to improve the services we provide both within the Independent Reviewing Service, but also as part of the organisation when supporting children and young people to improve their life chances and to develop the service further, wherever beneficial to do so. IRO manager will continue to regularly quality assure Review of Arrangements Reports, observe IRO's chairing practice for LAC Reviews and ensure the standards are maintained and best practice is shared.

The Independent Reviewing Service will develop a set of service standards so that children and young people know what to expect from us. These will be publicised and sent as a leaflet to all young people. Feedback will be monitored, shared and outcomes fed back to the senior management group.

Peer and review evaluations will continue with a (good) comparator with other Local Authorities to support further development of the Independent Reviewing Service and to share good practice that supports better outcomes for children and young people. This arrangement will be at management and IRO level and will further support service and practice development. Peer audits will focus on impact and seek to triangulate with outcomes, performance data and feedback on the service from children, young people, parents/carers and colleagues.

Over the last year, the service has continued to develop his objectives and establish a stronger presence in planning and communication within the wider service. In 2014/15, there was two team development days which focused on developing the team identify and the behaviour and expectations. There is a third team development day planned for November 2015 which will focus on improving quality and communication.