

London Borough of Lewisham

Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2022-23

The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Children and Young People who are looked after

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IRO and a young person cooking together learning to make mac n cheese



Introduction

The work that Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) do **contributes to the quality of care** experienced by our children and young people who are looked after. The service supports the aims of the **Corporate Parenting Strategy** (2021-2024) and its **6 key ambitions**, to improve how we champion, look after and care for children and young people. IROs also support the **8 aims and ambitions** of the **Sufficiency Strategy** (2022-2025), which sets out how the Local Authority will improve children and young people's living and care experiences.

Both strategies situate the safety, security, stability and sense of belonging our children and young people experience as central to the work of the Local Authority and its agency partners. We recommend both strategies are read alongside the IRO Annual Report.

The IRO service **celebrates the wonderful diversity** of our children and young people who are looked after. IROs are committed to continued learning, as well as championing and supporting **anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice**, and to challenge the racism, discrimination and lack of opportunities faced by some of our children and young people.

Children and young people who are looked after by Lewisham are entitled by law to have a named IRO, and Lewisham as a (corporate) parent, has a duty to provide every child and young person who is looked after with their own IRO.

IROs chair children and young people's review meetings, quality assure the care planning for children and young people, **and ensure their wishes and feelings are understood and represented**. IROs also provide a wider overview of children and young people's plans, including regular monitoring and follow up between reviews, and play a key role in care planning improvements, for instance in achieving permanence in children and young people's living arrangements.

IRO duties, responsibilities and activities include

- Chair timely, good quality, inclusive meetings for children and young people, provide robust oversight and review of their plans, and monitor the progress of plans between reviews
- Support child focused and child centred meetings via pre-meeting discussions. This improves participation and care planning, and ensures the voices of children and young people are captured and included
- Raise alerts and escalations (dispute resolution process) to social work teams and services about practice or systems that impact on good quality care of children and young people. This includes feedback about good practice as well as areas of concern
- Contribute to the recently established (in Q4) dispute resolution operational and strategic panels to influence and support practice and system improvements, and increase senior manager awareness and oversight of individual and themed issues
- Training and Development - provide briefings for students, newly qualified social workers and new staff.
- Contribute to oversight and review of permanency plans, care arrangements, transitions, secure accommodation for children and young people via attendance at forums such as panels and LPMs
- Communicate with Children's Guardians and provide their views and opinions in Care Proceedings
- Participate in practice improvement and quality assurance via audit
- Provide reports for foster carers' Registration Panel.

Our children and young people looked after – demographics, identity and individual characteristics 31.03.2023

Data for **2022-2023 highlighted a reduction in the numbers of children and young people becoming looked after** compared to figures for 2021-2022 (148:212), but also a reduction in children and young people ceasing to be looked after (172:215). Overall the number of children and young people looked after by Lewisham reduced to 439, which was a decrease of 6% from the year before (465).

The **downward trend of overall numbers of Lewisham children and young people who are looked after** is positive, and is in line with strategic priorities to improve services and interventions to Lewisham families at an earlier stage, and support more families to keep their children safely at home.

The data reflects that children and **young people of mixed or multiple heritage are currently significantly over-represented** in our looked after population; white children are significantly under-represented; black children are slightly under-represented; and Asian children are also under-represented (although the overall numbers for Asian children are small and any variance makes a significant difference to overall %).

Although the ethnic profile of our children and young people in Lewisham is similar to other London boroughs, it may be helpful going forward to explore the underlying reasons and causes for over or under representation of children according to their ethnicity, considering the links between poverty, ethnicity and social care interventions (and drawing on available research). This could include an analysis of the feedback about our practice and local services from parents, carers and children who have experienced safeguarding processes and systems, to establish **whether there are differences in people's reported experiences** depending on their ethnicity.

The % of boys looked after was higher than girls at the end of year (EOY) snapshot (54:46), which is similar to figures for the previous year. Some of our children and young people are reported to have changed gender

or transitioned, and IROs report that some of the children and young people they work with identify as non-binary, trans or LGBTQ+. We should consider whether our services, as well as our training and development offer, **adequately supports staff in providing good quality care and support to this group of children and young people.**

There was little movement in the age ranges of children looked after this year compared to last year, apart from a small reduction in the number of looked after children aged 16+ .

Children and young people with disabilities and complex needs are recognised by IROs to be particularly vulnerable. The publication of the NCSPP into Children with Complex Needs in Residential Settings earlier this year highlighted failures and weaknesses in the safeguarding and care systems for this group of children. The IRO service along with colleagues in CYP will continue to consider the best ways to contribute better to keeping children and young people safe.

Placements, permanency and stability

IROs support strategies and plans to improve children and young people achieving permanence through timely reviews and monitoring. They escalate concerns when delays in achieving permanence have been identified. IROs contribute to the permanency tracking panel, and continue to communicate any concerns to SW teams and managers when drift or delay is identified, through the dispute resolution process.

The IRO service acknowledges the current local difficulties in securing enough stable and good quality placements for children and young people, which is reflected nationally. It supports the action plan set out in the Sufficiency Strategy which includes improving early permanence planning, improving the quality, stability and availability of placements for children and young people, alongside strengthening support for children to remain safely at home with their parents or carers, or extended family and networks.

Children and young people's participation in their review meetings

Children decided to host a tea party for their looked after review meeting



In Q4 Lewisham CSC launched the **Signs of Connection and Belonging practice model**. IROs have been **enthusiastic and are committed** to developing and promoting the model to drive continued improvements in the participation of children, young people and their parents or carers, and support reflective thinking about good outcomes and impact for our children and young people.

Participation rates of children and young people in their review meetings remained stable this year with a small increase in the % (92:90) from last year. The inclusion and participation of children and young people remains a priority for the IRO service to ensure their voices, wishes and needs remain the central focus of care planning and review meetings. IROs share tools and ideas with one another to consider supportive, creative and inclusive ways to continually improve children and young people's participation in their review meetings and care planning.

A nice example of this was when an IRO encouraged an **8 year old girl who loves drawing** to draw her own meeting report. She really liked doing this and it meant she was fully involved and engaged in what was happening during her review meeting. This improved the focus of the adults in the meeting to remain **child focused and to use child-friendly language** to help her to continue to 'draw' her own record of the meeting.

Another example was provided by a social worker for a child, who fed back *'what a nice review that was with the child. Laid back and friendly. Me and the home manager said afterwards it was ideal for a review atmosphere and good practice for how the reviews should be for our looked after children. And **the child felt so part of it**'.*

The child herself attended the above review. She had struggled to attend review meetings prior to this due to feeling anxious. However, the IRO had included a photo of herself on the child's previous review letter, and had also noted in the letter the child's interest in K-Pop - the child felt more connected, and because she had seen the IRO's face in the letter she felt she wasn't a stranger, and was then able to attend and take part in her review meeting.

The IRO service will consider how we can extend good practice examples, such as those listed above, across the IRO service to improve and increase children's participation in their meetings, as well as improve how we obtain and **use consultation to gain feedback** that supports service and practice developments both in the IRO service but also in other teams and services. We will work with the newly appointed Participation Officer to progress this going forward.

Entitlements, advocacy and complaints for looked after children

Children and Young People who are looked after are **entitled to have an advocate and to make a complaint**. The IRO has a responsibility to check that children and young people know about this and know how to access this service. IROs check at Reviews whether an independent visitor is needed, and whether a child or young person has any communication needs requiring additional or specialist support. IROs can also directly refer a child for advocacy.

NYAS is commissioned to provide advocacy services for our children and young people. Key issues for children seeking advocacy are: support in meetings; placement moves; placement issues; access to services and relationships with social workers; and social work services and Pathway Planning.

6 young people made complaints in 2022-23 which is an increase from the year before when 1 complaint was received. All 6 complaints have been completed, 2 were not upheld and 4 were partly upheld. Complaints related to the child or young person's relationship with their social worker, decisions about their living arrangements, delays with payments and passports, and arrangements for Leaving Care. These themes are similar with those raised via advocacy, and raised through IRO dispute resolution.

Managers from Complaints, Advocacy and IRO services meet regularly. These meetings are helpful forums to discuss common themes and important issues or concerns for children and young people in care, and how these can best be presented to senior managers and decision-makers.

IROs support advocacy for all children becoming looked after, and at age 16, to support young people's understanding of what being looked after means, their rights and entitlements, and to support them with leaving care preparations and plans. **IROs also believe that advocacy for parents** should be made available to support their understanding of Local Authority involvement, promote good communication with social

work teams, and aid their participation and involvement with their children's plans including possible return to family care.

Practice, performance and impact

Lewisham's Partner in Practice (Islington PIP) completed a review of the quality of IRO records and minutes of review meetings in December 2022, which included the child's letter. Our PIP partner met with most of the IROs who provided some examples of their work. The quality of the work reviewed was reported to be child focused and good, reflecting some of the positive developments and improvement in the review meeting process.

However, work will continue during 2023-2024 to continue with improvements in the consistency of what is recorded for each child, as well as reviewing the impact the service has, to ensure every child and young person receives an equally good service.

Consideration is given to the individual needs of each child when planning reviews to best gain the views or wishes and feelings of children. Some examples of how IROs make children and young people feel valued, and support their inclusion and participation are the **use of emoji cards and symbols, of observing a child in their placement, completing direct picture work with a child, cooking with them.**

IROs remain focused on **how to ensure children's review meetings and plans are most effective** and continue to support the work of social work teams to work towards achieving good outcomes for children and young people. One social worker thanked the IRO for: *'being a supportive colleague...on a complex and challenging situation I have found very difficult. She has...managed reviews well and recognised the difficulty of the competing opinions and the complexity of the situation but in parallel been a listening ear and a kind colleague'*.

IROs focus on important issues for children. An example is highlighting when children and young people need passports. IROs believe this is important as it enables children and young people to be able to go on much needed and deserved foreign holidays with their carers and families, fostering a sense of belonging as well as supporting fun and positive leisure activity. It also promotes inclusion for children who may have had immigration issues and difficulties (ie if they were unaccompanied asylum seeking children; families with no recourse status).

IROs recognise the **importance of promoting life-long relationships** for children and young people, and support this via the care planning and review process. IROs routinely seek the views of parents and carers. This has included IROs contacting important family members abroad. One IRO met with a young asylum seeking child, and called his father, who lived in their country of origin, to see his views.

Another IRO explored how to contact the grandparents (who lived abroad) of a little girl to ensure they were consulted and involved in care plans, including permanency planning for her. This was a really positive meeting, the grandparents were described by the IRO as warm and loving people, with the potential to be involved with the little girl throughout her life.

Some of the issues identified by IROs (as well in other forums) are being progressed at strategic and operational level, which is positive. For instance, IROs have identified that the quality and consistency of **Life Story work** needed to improve, and the service supports CSC plans to commence a programme to develop this in Q1 2023. In addition, IROs had identified concerns for some children and young people when they transition between services. CSC launched a new **Transitions Panel** this year which increases senior management oversight in transition planning, and is anticipated will lead to more consistently good and improved practice.

Although it is noted some key performance indicators have plateaued and in some cases experienced a small drop this year resulting from capacity/staffing issues, IROs note there is evidence of good practice in the social work teams and services supporting children and young people.

The IRO service supports the new initiative which aims to **improve the experiences of children and young people coming into our care** (CCIOC), which has been developed by practitioners led by a team manager in the Family Support and Safeguarding service (FSS). This was presented to SMT in 2022 and received full support from senior managers and the ADCS.

The CCIOC practitioner guidance will be rolled out in Q1 2023-2024. It highlights the importance of good collaboration with parents as well as other professionals, consideration about how the identified placement will meet a child's needs (ie religious, dietary), and welcome packs for children. The initiative also includes the creation of a child friendly, comfortable and welcoming space/room where children being brought into the care of the Local Authority can be cared for until they can be taken to their placement.

IROs will highlight when good and impactful social work practice takes place. Examples of this include really good work with one child experiencing an open adoption. The IRO commented the child's case was complex, but the social worker was supportive to the child, and alongside other professionals worked in a way that promoted relationships between the child, the adopters and birth family members, which will support the child in maintaining important life-long links and relationships.

Another example highlighted by an IRO was the support provided by a social worker to a young child with complex needs. The IRO noted the SW had worked well with the child's family, and the child was living in a stable foster home.

An IRO commented on how the social work team for an unaccompanied child listened to his views about where he wanted to live (close to other extended family members in the UK based in another part of London), which helped the young person to cope with stress, **as well as improving his self-esteem and family links.**

Another young person in his GCSE year was living some distance from his school. His studies were very important to him, and although it was a difficult decision to make in changing his placement, the social work team listened to his views, and an alternative placement closer to his school was identified for him. The IRO reported the **young person now feels more relaxed as he has more time to study**, and this has impacted positively on his emotional well-being.

It is positive that social work teams are supporting children to remain with their families when it is safe to do so. One IRO commented that the social work team *'believed in...the mother's ability to bring positive changes, completed relevant assessments, provided necessary intervention, and worked in partnership with the family and partner agencies. **The outcome is beautiful because [the child] remains in the care of his mother – because it is safe to do so.'***

IROs understand the importance of their own role in children's lives, and of building relationships with children and young people. This has been particularly important during periods when some children have experienced changes in social workers and transitions between teams and services.

During this year IROs started holding **regular reflective sessions** on particular issues and themes to share learning, knowledge and skills, and improve practice. These have included sessions about working with fathers, anti-oppressive practice issues, better supporting children and young people to understand their history.

The IRO service chaired 1073 individual looked after review meetings, and 89% were held on time. This is a small decrease in performance from the year before (93%), and is slightly below our target of 90%. Reviews may be delayed or rescheduled to ensure the right people are at the meeting, and to ensure the best review of a child's plan takes place. However, going forward the IRO service will aim to improve performance in this area, alongside improvements in social work teams and services.

The consistency of IRO timeliness in completing review minutes and child letters continues to need further improvement. This will be a key focus for managers going forward, and a request has been made for a

monthly performance report to support our understanding of where the gaps and areas for improvement are.

Dispute resolution – themes and issues

236 escalations and alerts were raised in by IROs in 2022-2023, which was an increase from 2021-2022. These included 32 Practice learning Alerts on wider issues to senior management. The majority of these have been resolved at time of reporting but we continue to work with SW teams and managers towards more prompt resolution of issues.

Similar to previous years, IROs use the dispute resolution process when concerns are identified about issues affecting children and young people such as drift or delay, practice issues (ie late PMRs, transfer of children between teams and services), and issues such as payments to carers.

As the data above suggests IROs have increased the use of the dispute resolution process this year. Positively this reflects the increased IRO ‘footprint’ and impact, but also underlines the increased understanding and awareness of managers and practitioners of how the dispute resolution process is a helpful mechanism to alert managers at all levels to any themed or individual concerns about an individual child, or children more generally. As such it is an additional ‘tool’ available to support ongoing practice and systems improvements for our children and young people.

Other developments this year to improve quality of practice and impact included the launch in January 2023 of a quarterly strategic themed concerns panel chaired by the Principle Social Worker. The panel aims to support improved senior manager oversight of broader systems or practice issues affecting our looked after children. Similarly, a monthly operational alerts and escalation panel was established in March 2023, which addresses concerns raised about practice and systems affecting individual children. The panels are attended by senior managers, IROs and SWs and managers.

We have requested a performance report for alerts and escalations because this would support more prompt and detailed analysis of performance timescales, and a more efficient way to collate themes and issues. In lieu of this the IRO manager continues to provide monthly summary analysis of alerts and escalations to the extended CSC senior management team.

Priorities, plans and improvement activities for 2023-2024

Activity	Aim/outcome	How	By when
Consistently good, child friendly IRO reports/child letters across the service	All Lewisham children and young people have access to child friendly records of their review meetings. This will contribute to children’s understanding of their lives and life story.	IROs ensure letters are child friendly, and contain the right information. IRO manager and HOS dip sample and individual feedback Group supervision	Q2
Improved timescales for IRO reports and child letters across the service	Children feel valued and respected, receive the record of their review in timely way, and practice is accountable.	IROs complete reports in agreed timescales. Performance report developed and used by IRO manager and HOS SQA to support good performance	Q3
Consultation form to be updated	Consultation form is a helpful, intuitive form for children which encourages them to share their views.	Participation Officer/IRO service to review current form. CICC to be included in design.	Q3

CLA reviews take place in a timely way and performance is consistently above 90% target	PMRs are completed for every children and young person's review meeting, and in timescale. This will improve the review of children's plans in their meetings.	PMR performance target is set (suggested 80%+) and is reviewed via performance reporting, at SMT and DMT, and in CSC performance clinics	
Consultation form to be provided to each child or young person, they are supported to complete it.	Children and young people's voices are heard, and their views are acted on at individual and strategic level, and inform service and practice improvements in the IRO and social work services.	IRO Manager/HOS SQA/Participation Officer to review current system and process for sending and receiving forms to children. Review of information to be built into analysis of performance and practice and shared across services and with SMT.	Q3
Embed alert panel and themed panel to improve responses to alerts, and identify where practice and system improvements need to happen.	Improvements in important areas such as permanency planning are supported via the dispute resolution process. This is evidenced in measures such as increased numbers and rate of children and young people achieving permanency in timescales that meet their needs. PMR performance improves and children and young people's review meetings enable relevant and purposeful discussion about children's needs and plans for every child. Managers at all levels are informed, involved, and respond to concerns and issues raised by IROs on behalf of children and young people	HOS SQA, IRO manager, HOS CLA, Principal Social Worker – ensure meetings are held regularly, the right people attend, actions are followed up, and learning is shared	Ongoing
Review of IRO role in safeguarding systems	Improve safety of children and young people	HOS SQA to work with other HOS to establish where systems and practice can improve in the safety networks around looked after children and young people	Q3-Q4
IROs to continue to seek the views and include important people in children's lives in the review process	Support and contribute to children forming, maintaining and developing important relationships	Case files to evidence footprint of IRO and evidence that children and young people and people important to them are included in plans and reviews	Ongoing
IRO will continue to raise their concern about late/delayed PMRs	Children and young people's reviews will be held on time and there will be clear updating assessments of their needs and plan	IROs will raise individual and themed alerts and escalations SW teams and managers to review in performance clinics and supervisions.	Ongoing

		<p>CSC and FQC SMT to review in SMT meetings</p> <p>Performance team to provide regular report so IRO service and SW managers to support forward management of this</p>	
<p>Close the loop with evidence of impact of learning from complaints, QA, and advocacy, themed alerts</p>	<p>Evidence of practice and systems improvements through feedback from learning which impact on children and young people's outcomes</p>	<p>HOS SQA and Principal SW to review current systems for cascading learning to operational teams and services</p>	<p>Q2</p>

Sarah Sturge, IRO Manager
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Report agreed: Vicky Rogers, Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance 11.07.2023