London Borough of Lewisham Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2015/16

London Borough of Lewisham
Independent Reviewing Service
Annual Report
2015/16

CONTENTS

<div style="border:1px solid black; text-align:center">

London Borough of Lewisham
Independent Reviewing Service
Annual Report
2015/16

</div>

1.   Introduction

1.1   The purpose of this annual report is to provide an account of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Service between 1 April 2015 and the 31 March 2016. This report analyses and evaluates practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children and the effectiveness of the Independent Reviewing Officer service in ensuring the local authority, as a corporate parent, discharges its statutory responsibilities towards looked after children.

2.   Purpose of service and legal context

2.1   Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) were nationally introduced to represent the interests of looked after children. Their role was strengthened through the introduction of statutory guidance in April 2011. The Independent Review Officers (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) and linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011.

2.2   This report identifies good practice as well as highlighting areas for development in relation to the IRO function. The IRO has a key and statutory role in relation to the improvement of care planning for looked after children. The responsibility of the IRO is to have an overview of the child's care planning arrangements in respect of the child's wellbeing in placement, as well as oversight of the child's health and education. The IRO will offer constructive and targeted scrutiny and challenge regarding case management through regular monitoring and follow up between children's reviews as appropriate.

2.3   The National Children's Bureau (NCB) research 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings regarding the efficacy of IRO services. The foreword written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; 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.**

2.4   The NCB research outlines a number of important recommendations with three having a particular influence on IROs' work plan priorities, these are;

- Where IROs identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to looked after children, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.

- IROs method for monitoring cases and how this activity is recorded should be clarified.

- A review of IROs core activities and additional tasks should be undertaken. There is a need to establish whether IROs additional activities compromise independence or capacity.

2.5   The majority of Lewisham's Looked After Children are allocated with the Looked After and Care Leaving Social Work Teams (approximately 70%), and some of the children (approximately 30%) are allocated to other service areas such as the Family Support Social Work Teams and Children with Complex Needs.

3.   Summary & Key messages

3.1   This Annual IRO report provides both quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO services in Lewisham, as required by statutory guidance.

- The profile of our Looked After Children shows that our cohort of children are getting older and staying longer in care.
- Numbers becoming and ceasing to be looked after have remained relatively stable over three years.
- The majority of children have a care plan based on assessed need and are satisfied with this plan.
- The majority of children's care plans are deemed to be of good quality (76.4%)
- IRO caseloads are within national guidance limits (50 to 65 per IRO) In Lewisham IROs have between 60 and 70 children and young people.
- IROs are monitoring and escalating issues appropriately.
- An area of concern for all services within Children's Social Care including the IRO Service is the risk of our looked after children in becoming involved in gangs or negative peer groups.
- IROs targeted 38% of cases for active monitoring due to the rag status attributed to them. (See section 6 at 6.2 for further details).
- The vast majority of monitoring forms completed by IROs did not necessitate escalation (83.1%).
- A proportion of cases were identified as Amber and Red in terms of cases monitored (15% and 0.1%) indicating that the IRO Service has been active in its monitoring of children's care plans. (See section 6 and table 9 for details).
- The majority of escalations are resolved before they reach Service Manager or above for scrutiny.

4

3.2   Improvement activities for 2015/16 have included

- Recruitment of permanent IROs to ensure a stable service and responsive service (see 4.2 below).
- Developing a better understanding amongst children and young people about the role of their IRO and how children can best utilise IROs to ensure their needs are met
- Development of closer understanding and working partnerships with internal and external agencies including the Virtual School, Looked after Health Team, Serious Youth Violence Team and the Youth Offending Service
- Promoting IROs individual work plan priorities such as:

  o   Achieving permanency for children in care without delay.
  o   Improving participation of looked after children and young people.
  o   Ensuring children's placements are providing value in meeting children's assessed needs.

4.   The IRO Service: Context
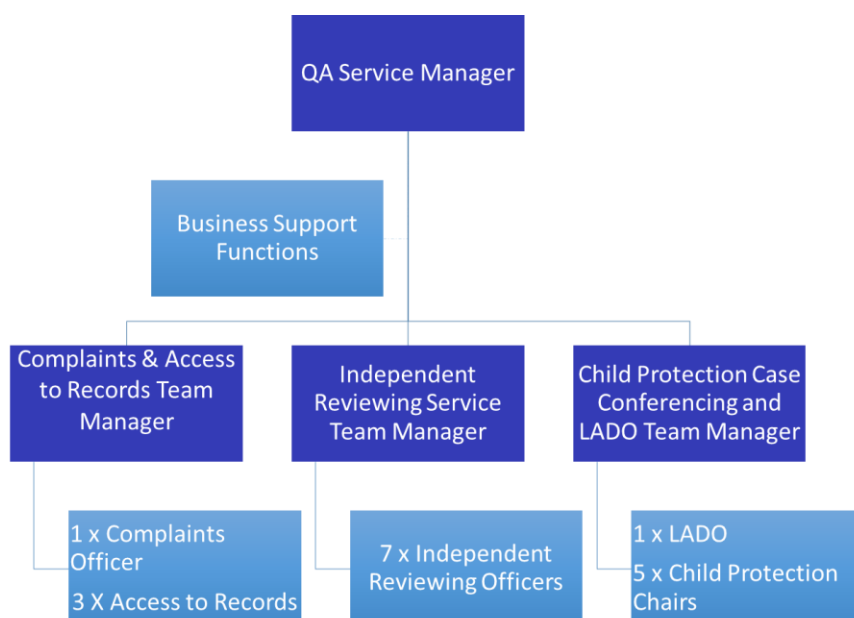
4.1   The IRO Service sits within the Quality Assurance Service of Children's Social Care (see above organisational chart) with its core functions consisting of reviewing plans for children in care and monitoring the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding responsibilities.

4.2   The team has experienced some change with two long term IROs leaving and one becoming part time. Time has been spent on recruitment and new IROs started in 2016/17. Although we still have two vacancies we are fortunate that we have 2 locum IROs who have worked in the role previously. Therefore, although some children have experienced a lack of continuity, particularly in relation to one IRO who had long term absence, we have sought to prioritise continuity of IRO and have been able to deliver this for most children.

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

4.3 IROs are part of the Quality Assurance Service and are qualified, experienced Social Workers with management experience. Lewisham has 7 full time IRO posts which are filled with 6 full time IROs and 2 job share IROs. In terms of diversity, the profile of the service is not at the same level as Lewisham's looked after children's population but is representative of a range of gender, age, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds.

4.4 The IRO Team works exclusively with Looked After Children, working alongside the Child Protection Chairs' team. The IRO team has a Team Manager who works 4 days a week, who is line managed in turn by the Service Manager for Quality Assurance.

4.5 All IROs have formal monthly supervision provided by the Manager of the IRO Service where their caseload, practice issues, personal welfare and professional development is discussed.

5.   Profile of Children Looked After in Lewisham

5.1 The number of Looked After Children as at 31st March 2016 was 463 (see graph 2 below). IRO caseloads have been between 65 to 70 children per fte IRO. This is within the recommended case load of 50 to 70 set out in the IRO Handbook. The graph below shows that numbers of LAC have decreased in the last three years by 37 children (approximately 7%) from 500 in March 2014.
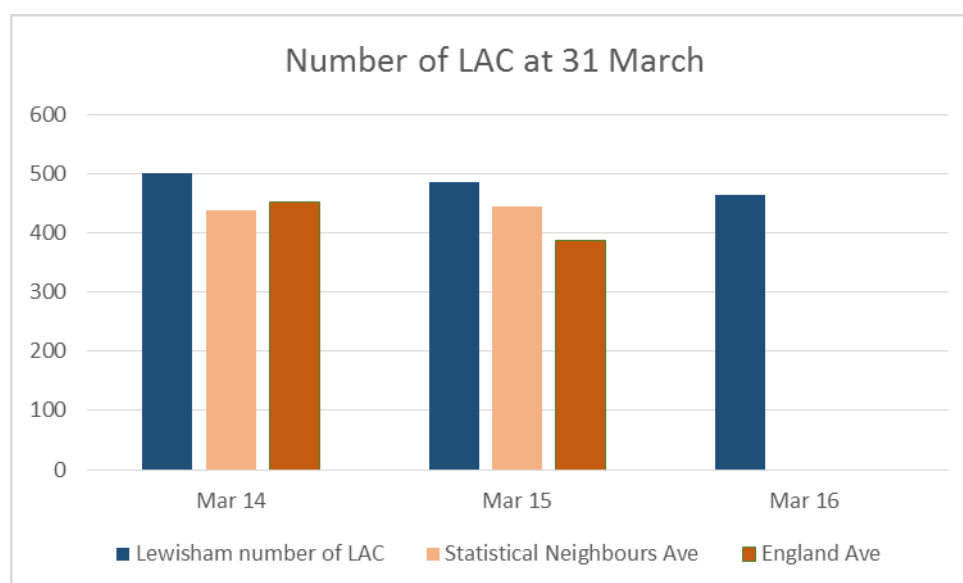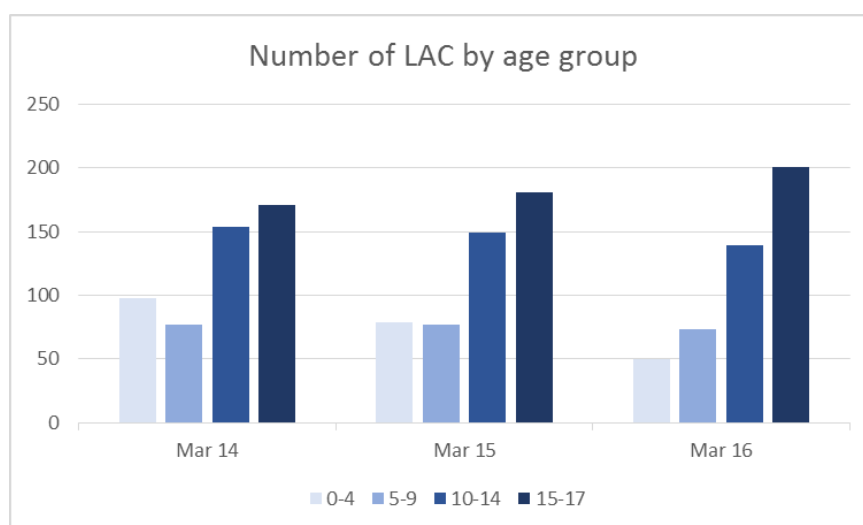

Graph 2
Source: SSDA903

5.2 Numbers of Looked After Children in Lewisham have been traditionally higher than both comparators and the national average. This creates obvious pressures on both the Social Work services and the IRO Service in terms of ensuring that children's placements are well sourced, and promote wellbeing and stability in relation to their healthcare and educational needs as well as children and young people's emotional needs.

6

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

5.3 Looked After Children (per 10,000 of children and young people in the general population) below (2014 to 2016), demonstrates this point in the reduction of numbers in Lewisham, but still a higher rate than statistical neighbours and national rates. At the time of reporting, statistical data for the national average as at March 2016 was not available.
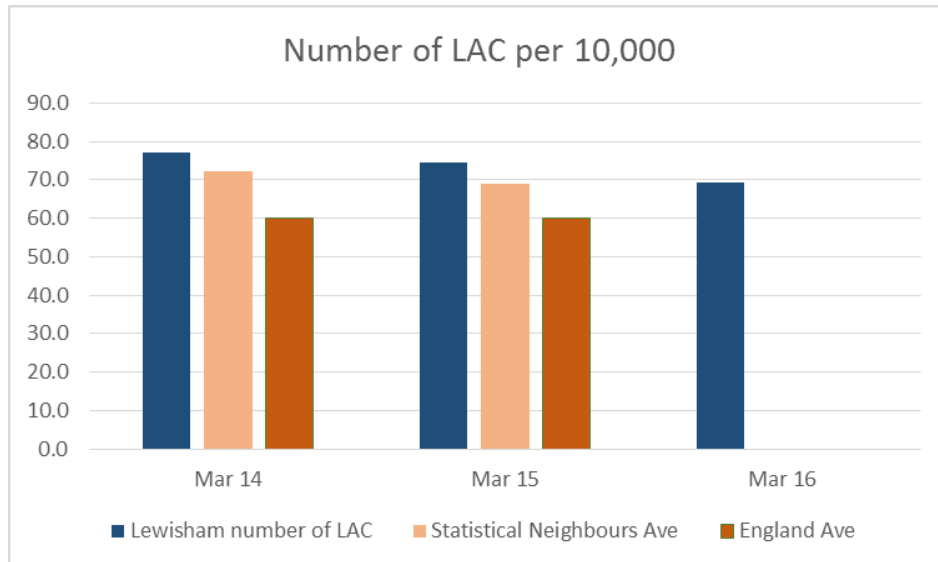
Graph 3
Source: SSDA903

5.4 The graph below (Graph 4) shows numbers of Looked After Children by age group. The same information is shown at Tables 1 & 2, first by number and then by percentage. As can be seen, the highest proportions of our LAC population are in the older age categories (10 to 14 years and 15 to 17 years). Between March 2015 and March 2016, the 15 to 17 age group increased by 6.2%.

5.5 This has led to specific challenges in maintaining placements for an aging population of our LAC and requires both the Social Work teams and the IRO Service to ensure that there is effective pathway planning in place for our young people as they move towards independence and adulthood, i.e., ensuring that there is sufficiency in these type of placements for our young people.

Graph 4
Source: SSDA903

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

Number of LAC by age group	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-17	Totals
Mar 14	98	77	154	171	**500**
Mar 15	79	77	149	181	**486**
Mar 16	50	73	139	201	**463**

Table 1
Source: SSDA903

% of LAC by age group	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-17
Mar 14	19.6	15.4	30.8	34.2
Mar 15	16.3	15.8	30.7	37.2
Mar 16	10.8	15.8	30.0	43.4

Table 2
Source: SSDA903
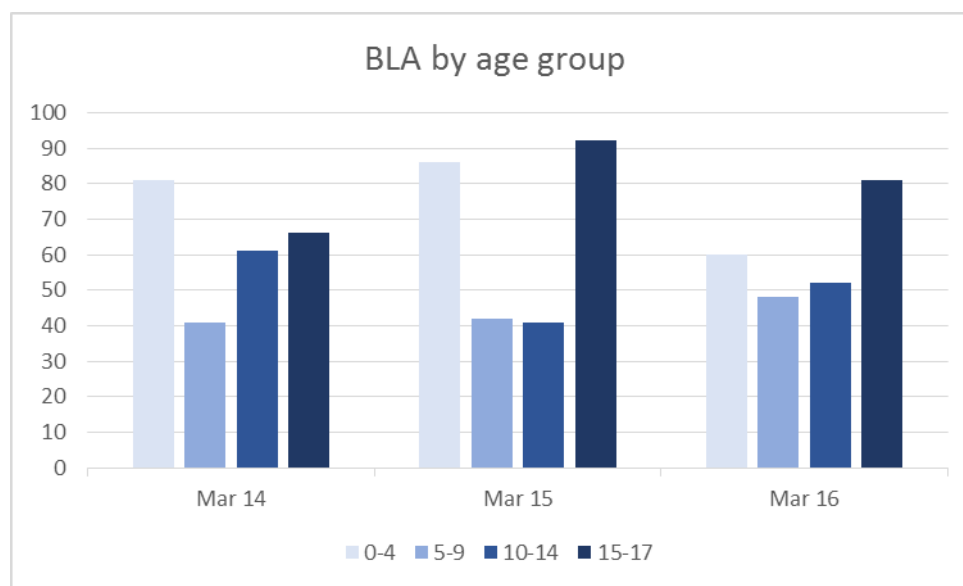
Graph 5
Source: SSDA903

| BLA by age group	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-17	Total
Mar 14	81	41	61	66	249
Mar 15	86	42	41	92	261
Mar 16	60	48	52	81	241

Table 3
Source: SSDA903

5.6   Table 3 and Graph 5 above shows the age of looked after children at the point that they became looked after. The highest numbers are with the age 0-4 age group and the 15 to 17 year group. This information should be viewed alongside the numbers of Looked After Children starting and ceasing to be looked after, the duration of children's time in care and the ages of children as at the end of the year shown below on pages 9 and 10 at graphs 6 and 7, and tables 5 and 6. This appears to demonstrate that children entering care are older aged children. This is especially marked in 2015/16 where the highest proportion (33%, n=81) were children in the 15 to 17 age group.
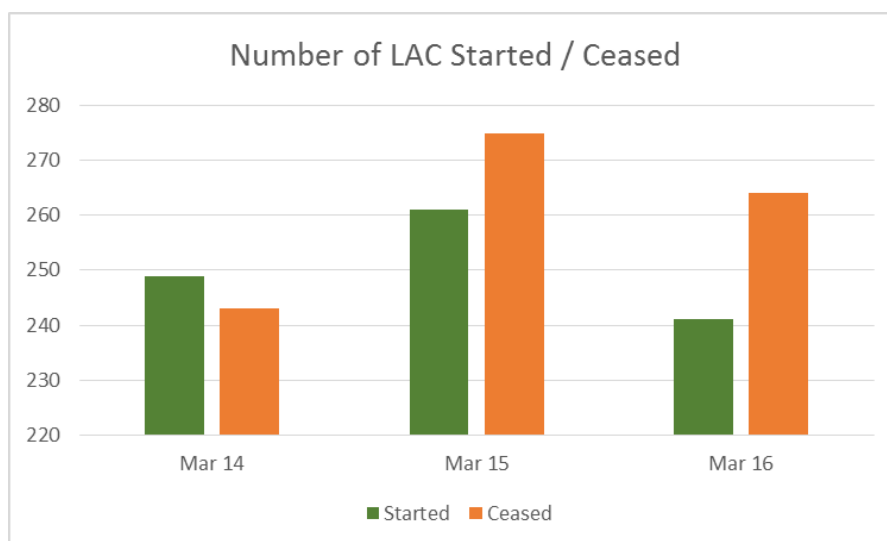
IRO Annual Report 2015/16

5.7   The proportions of Looked After Children by ethnicity are shown at the table below for the years 2014 to 2016. Whilst the proportion of children and young people who are of White ethnicity has dropped very slightly, the proportion of those identified as of Black ethnicity has risen slightly. As is the case for those children and young people of Asian ethnicity.

5.8   This again has implications in terms of IROs ensuring that placements for children and young people are attentive and address the cultural needs of our LAC population and this is addressed via care planning and review of these needs by the IRO Service.

% of LAC by Ethnicity	BLACK	WHITE	ASIAN	MULTI	OTHER
Mar 14	37.8	31.2	5.4	21.6	4
Mar 15	39.9	32.7	6.0	18.1	3.3
Mar 16	41.3	30.9	7.1	19.0	1.7

Table 4
Source: SSDA903
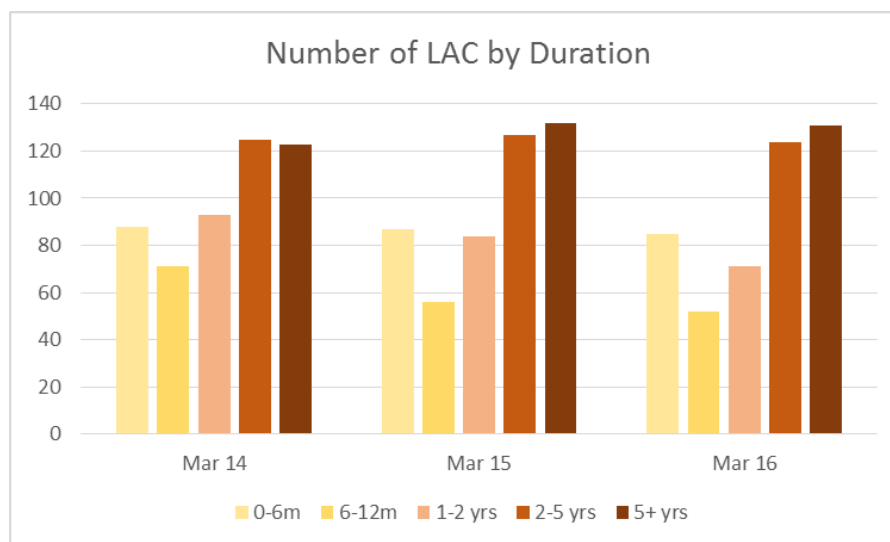
Graph 6
Source: SSDA903

Graph 7
Source: SSDA903

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

Number of LAC by Duration	0-6m	6-12m	1-2 yrs	2-5 yrs	5+ yrs
Mar 14	17.6	14.2	18.6	25	24.6
Mar 15	17.9	11.5	17.3	26.1	27.2
Mar 16	18.4	11.2	15.3	26.8	28.3

Table 5
Source: SSDA903

Number of LAC Started / Ceased	Started	Ceased
Mar 14	249	243
Mar 15	261	275
Mar 16	241	264

Table 6
Source: SSDA903

5.9 The graphs (5 & 6) and tables (4 & 5) above show both the duration of time that children and young people were looked after by Lewisham, and those children starting and ceasing to be looked after as at 31st March from 2014 to 2016.

5.10 In respect of the length of time children and young people were looked after, the highest proportions are with the longer term looked after children. This shows that Lewisham Looked After Children are getting older and staying looked after longer, although proportions have remained fairly stable excepting a slight decrease for those children looked after for 6 to 12 mths (3%) and an increase for those looked after for 5 years or more (approximately 4%).

5.11 In respect of those children and young people starting and ceasing to be looked after throughout the year to the end of March 2014 through to 2016, numbers have been more or less stable with a drop of 20 children starting to be looked after from March 2015 to the end of March 2016, and a slight drop in the number ceasing in the same time period (n = 9).
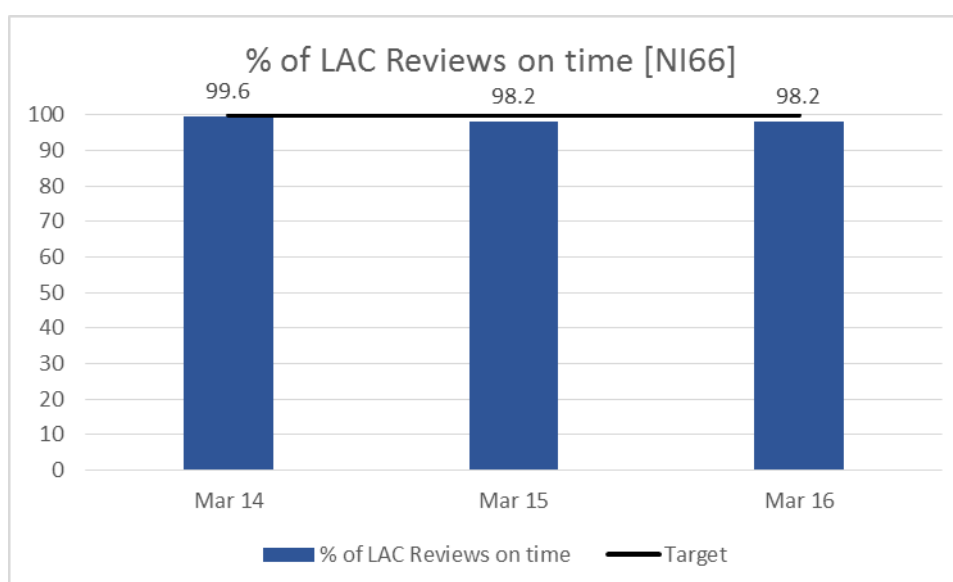

Graph 8
Source: SSDA903

IRO Annual Report 2015/16
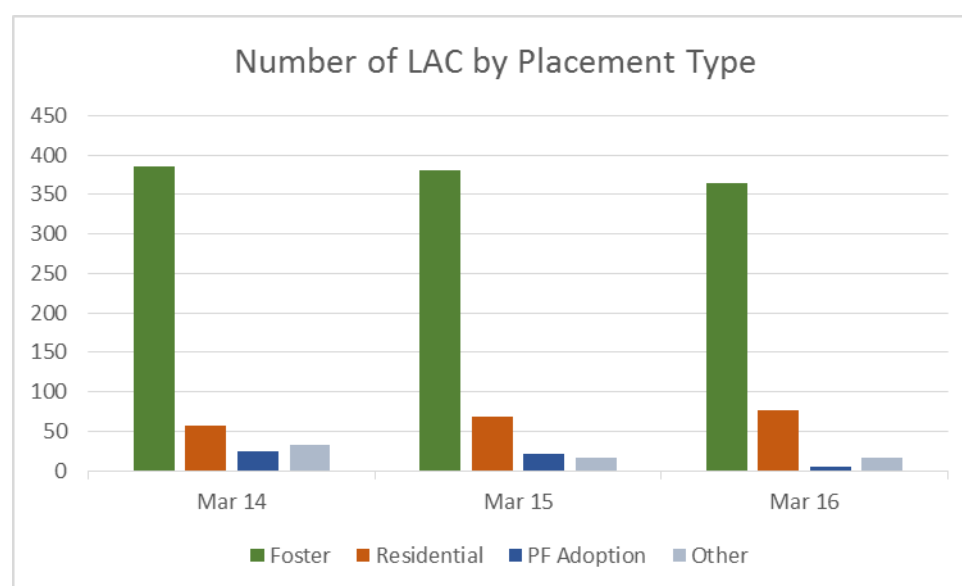
5.12 The above graph shows children as at the end of the year (2014 to 2016) by placement type. The majority of children are in foster placements provided either in house to Lewisham or by independent provider. Placement sufficiency for children becoming looked after is an ongoing issue which is currently being addressed with the Fostering and Placements Service and improvements to sourcing placements which meet children's identified needs are expected through 2016 to 2017.

5.13 The new Fostering Strategy will impact upon quantity and quality of placements through improved quality assurance on both in house and independent fostering. There are new contractual arrangements being negotiated with preferred residential providers, and improvements to recruitment and review of in house Foster Carers and quality assurance of independent fostering services. The Placements Service have been improving how placements are sourced and are using shared provider frameworks such as the London Council's list of preferred placement providers.

6. Performance, Scrutiny & Challenge

Timeliness of reviews

Graph 9
Source: SSDA903

% of LAC Reviews on time [NI66]	Mar 14	Mar 15	Mar 16
% of LAC Reviews on time	99.6	98.2	98.2
Target	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 7
Source: SSDA903

6.1 As stated, key areas of the IRO role include ensuring that reviews are held in timescales set out in guidance (the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulation, 2010) and ensuring that concerns in respect of delay and drift to care planning are escalated appropriately. The graph above shows the former national indicator NI66 (% of LAC Reviews in timescale). The initial review for Looked After Children when they first enter care should be held within 28 days of the date that they become looked after by the local authority.

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

6.2 Subsequent reviews are held within three months and thereafter, once every six months for the length of time that the child or young person is looked after. Comparative national and regional data is no longer available for this indicator as it is no longer reported nationally, however, data was available until 2013 when statistical neighbours' performance was at 85.8, and therefore Lewisham's performance exceeds this by almost 13%.

Escalation of Issues Regarding Children Looked After

6.3 Lewisham's IRO team practice a quality assurance model using both monitoring and escalations to highlight issues which require redress and attention either from the social worker or managers. IROs note cases at the time of the child's looked after review which require ongoing monitoring.

6.4 IROs highlight and detail concerns if they rate a case Amber or Red. The details are noted on the post review monitoring form which is recorded in the child's records with the team and service manager notified so that they can take action to address the concern. Examples of these concerns are:

1. A child exhibiting increased self-harming behaviour at his placement and at school;
2. The need for an alternative placement to be sought to prevent an escalation of gang activity and offending
3. Delay in therapeutic intervention for identified attachment issues, placement stability and issues raised about superficial self-harm.

6.5 IROs target cases for active monitoring, which is informal escalation, if they have rated a case Amber or Red as this means that there is a significant concern about a child, or in Red rated cases, the plan to address these concerns is not yet adequate in the IRO's view. IROs also actively monitor some Green rated cases if they fall within criteria which can hinder a good progression in meeting the care plan for the child.

Total Numbers and % of Escalation for Looked After Children by Team to end of March 2016					
	No Escalation		Yes - Escalated		Total
Teams/Service	Number	%	Number	%	Number
Adoption	49	4.2	3	5.6	52
CWD	85	7.2	8	14.8	93
FSW	133	11.3	14	25.9	147
R&A	5	0.4	0	0.0	5
CLA & LC	900	76.3	27	50.0	927
No Team recorded	8	0.7	2	3.7	10
Grand Totals	**1180**	**100.0**	**54**	**100.0**	**1234**

Table 8
Source: LCS IRO Monitoring Forms

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

RAG Status of Escalations		
	n	%
None	10	1.1
Amber	187	15.0
Green	1026	83.1
Red	9	0.7
Grand Total	**1234**	

Table 9
Source: LCS IRO Monitoring Forms

6.6 Some of reasons for formal escalations in 2015/16 include the following:

- Asylum application and family tracking;
- Delay in Pathway Planning and referral to Adults service;
- Delays to updating the child's care plan;
- Improvements needed to family contact arrangements;
- Additional provision of educational support required;
- Delay in sourcing and providing therapeutic support;
- Lateness in achieving permanence;
- Unclear planning following transfer of case responsibility;
- Delays to effective transition planning for disabled children.

6.7 The above concerns have been highlighted with the relevant service areas and work is in hand to address both the transfer issue and placement sufficiency for our looked after children. (See 5.11 to 5.12 above).

6.8 The tables above show both the number and % of escalations made by IROs by team in the year to the end of March 2016, and by RAG status. As can be seen, the highest proportion of escalations (50%) is unsurprisingly with the team whose children and young people had the substantive number of reviews in the year and that is the Children Looked After and Leaving Care Service.

6.9 A number (10) of the monitoring forms are incomplete in terms of no team or no RAG status recorded. We endeavour to ensure that all monitoring forms are completed.

6.10 In total, there were 1,234 monitoring forms completed in the year for reviews (2015/16). The RAG status of the escalations is shown by number and % above. The vast majority (1026 or 83.1%) of reviews with monitoring forms show that there is no need to escalate issues (Green).

6.11 Only 0.7% (9) were highlighted as Red status. A case is Red if there is a significant concern, and there is not a good plan in place or no active network around the child. In all of these 9 instances, monitoring showed that the IRO did not endorse the Care Plan and this was resolved with the Social Worker and the Team Manager in each case. A case is Amber if a significant concern is present for the child, but there is a good plan in place and there is an active network of services

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

**The wellbeing of, and services delivered to, looked-after children for the year ending 31st March 2016.**

6.12   The table and graph below is taken from the IROs' monitoring forms in respect of reviews for those children who are looked after. A proportion of the questions on the monitoring forms were not answered or completed by IROs, however, recent monitoring of completion rates have shown improvements.

6.13   There are a proportion where the care plan, in the view of the IROs concerned, has not been updated and based on the child's assessed need (10%), and where this is apparent, it is expected that the IRO will escalate this issue to the social worker and the Team Manager responsible.

6.14   Overall, care planning for Looked After Children ensures that children have an updated care plan based on assessed need, children are aware of the content of their care plan and, importantly, are satisfied with this (80%). Where it is not applicable, the child is too young to understand the content of their plan (under 4 years of age).

Care Planning for Looked After Children				
% of Children	**Yes**	**No**	**Not answered**	**Not Applicable**
Updated Care Plan based on Assessed Need	90	10	0	0
Did the child receive a copy of Care Plan	85	7	2	6
Is the child satisfied with the Care Plan	80	10	4	6
Does the Parent have a copy of the Care Plan?	80	12	2	6
Does the Carer have a copy of the Care Plan?	80	10	0	10

Table 10
Source: LCS

Graph 10
Source: LCS

IRO Annual Report 2015/16
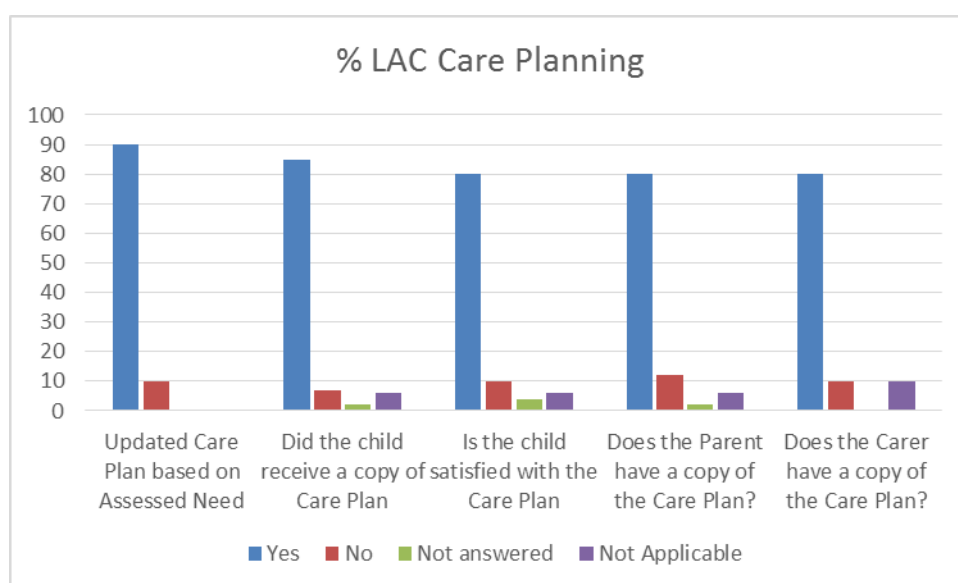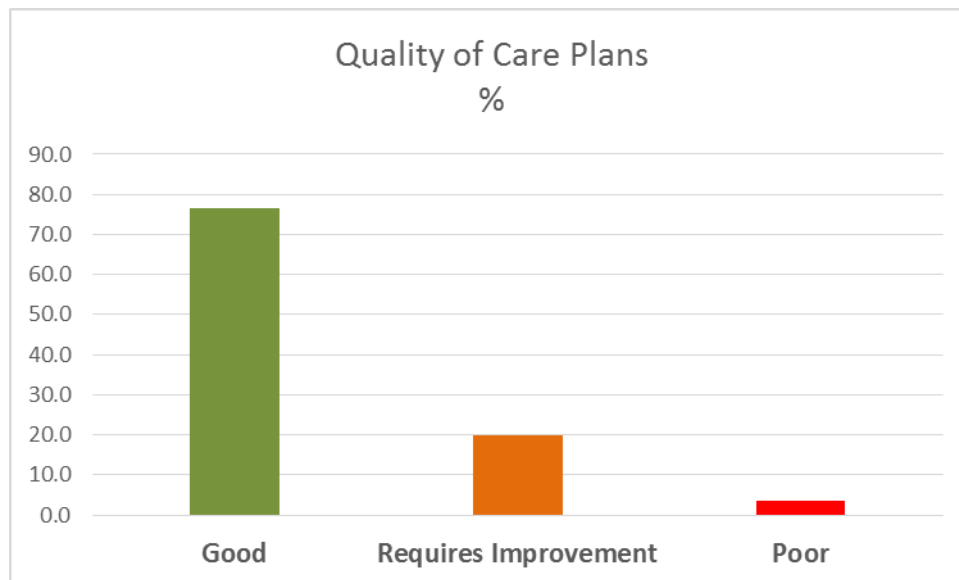
Graph 11
Source: LCS

6.15   The above graph shows that the majority of care plans (76.3%) are deemed to be of good quality. There was proportion which were deemed to be either requiring improvement or poor (20% and 3% respectively). Where this has been the case, the IRO will highlight this both with the social worker and Team Manager concerned to address these areas within the child's timescales.

6.16   Themes of concern that arise through monitoring relate to, the length of time it can take for the transfer process to happen between social work services as this can result in delayed action, as well as Placement Sufficiency, in particular recruitment of suitable local foster carers skilled and willing to care for children with more challenging behavioural and emotional needs, or for teenagers who are not used to or adhering to care boundaries.

6.17   The above concerns have been highlighted with the relevant service areas and work is in hand to address both the transfer issue and placement sufficiency for our looked after children.

7.   Participation of Children & Young People

7.1   The pack of information which Social Workers and IROs give to children and young people becoming looked after includes the Lewisham's Pledge to Looked After Children. This is:

- To have a named Social Worker
- To have a care plan all about them and their needs
- To review the care plan with them and regularly check that all is well
- To have a named IRO
- To involve children in decisions about them
- To give children in care the same chances as each other and other children and respect their different needs and treat them equally
- To listen and respond if they are unhappy about their care

7.2   IROs routinely check that children and young people know about how to access advocacy services should these be required and how this service can support them in having a real say in decisions affecting their lives.

15

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

7.3   The broad profile of children referred for advocacy as at 31st March 2016 was as follows:

- children with a registered disability
- unaccompanied asylum seeker
- children with whose first language is not English
- children in secure accommodation
- children placed at a distance

7.4   Advocacy can be essential for the children and young people and these processes can make a vital contribution to safeguarding and promoting their welfare and rights.
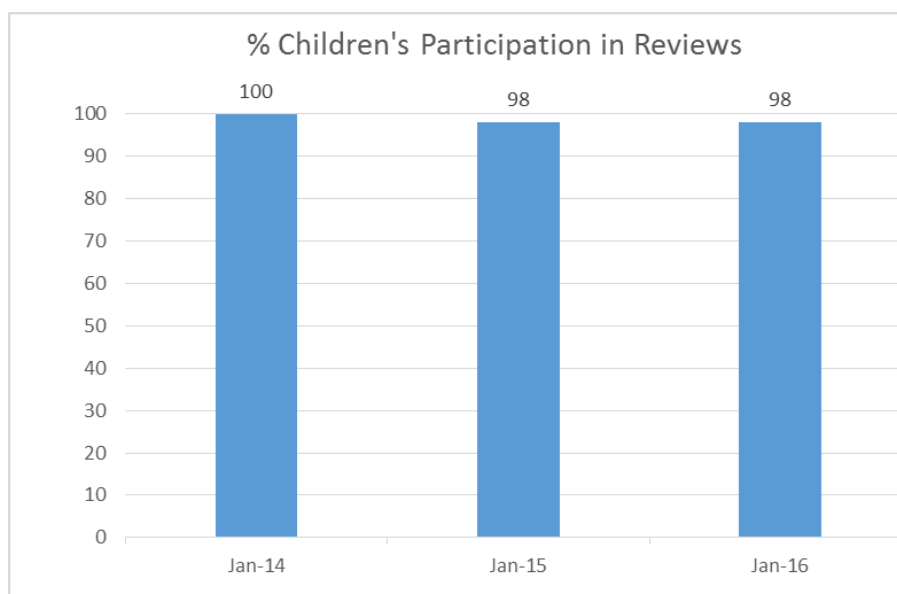
Graph 12
Source: LCS

7.5   The graph above shows children's participation in their reviews as a percentage of all children as at the end of the year who were looked after. As can be seen, performance has been stable. Of the children at the end of the year 2016, only 7 children did not participate in some manner. Everything possible is done to encourage children and young people to participate in their reviews and IROs will speak to children before, during and after reviews to garner their views and thoughts on how well they feel that their placement is meeting their needs.

8.   Children's Views about their IRO and their review process

8.1   A children and young people's feedback system was introduced during 2016 and has helped to ensure children have a say about their experience of their IROs and how they Chair their Review.

8.2   The rating scales used currently are 'Good', 'OK', 'Not happy'. Of the 25 reviews rated by children for this period, 19 were 'Good' with 6 rated 'OK' and 0 'Not happy'.

8.3   Children have expressed views to IROs in respect of their knowledge of the IRO role and how children and young people feel about the structure of the review. Children have stated that they wish the review process to be 'informal', and are sometimes reluctant to participate in the review even though they are encouraged to participate.

16

IRO Annual Report 2015/16

Some comments from review participants and young people:

S participated well at her review. She was upset that she did not get the exam results she wanted as it might affect her getting into her school of choice. She was upbeat about the decisions made to support her through the next steps in furthering her education

'I feel safe. I am guarded by Angel (house dog) and everyone at my house.'

'Things are good. I enjoy the trampoline and my IPAD.'

I like going out; going to the park; Winter Wonderland; Chessington especially and holidays; to France. I can decide what my bedroom looks like; I have a trampoline and a nice play room. I can play outside with other children and have sleepovers as well. I eat nice puddings!

The head teacher is very impressed with K's academic ability and she was invited to read a poem and take part in the launch of the school's new initiative.

'I'd like to meet more people and try more new things.'

Thank you card from a Care Leaver to his IRO.

'Thanks is not enough to say how grateful I am for your help and support over these years. You have stayed and helped where as other people have left. You have made me who I am today. '

17

9.   Areas for Improvement

9.1   The IRO Service continues to perform well in respect of timeliness of reviews and encouraging children to participate in reviews and when monitoring between and at the point of review. However, there are areas which require further development. These are:

- **Ensuring children and young people understand the role of the IRO** and the importance of the review process. To this end IROs will survey children and young people's views to gain a better and clearer understanding of where children are not sufficiently well informed of the purpose of the role of the IRO. The Service will develop an action plan as a result of this survey which will focus upon ensuring that children are informed and feel able to discuss issues of concern with their IRO appropriately in order to promote a sense of security for children and to enhance placement stability. This will also form part of the wider LAC Survey Plan.

- **Completion of monitoring forms on the LCS.** The IRO Service reports to SMT monthly on the outcome of monitoring children and young people's care planning needs. Improvements will made to ensure that these monitoring forms are completed (all monitoring questions answered) and are done in good time for reporting monthly. This will support the management overview of the quality of placements and care planning for Looked After Children and thereby support any required improvements to care planning and service provision to children.

- **Improving the IRO input to Foster Carers' Annual Reviews.** As part of their Annual Review, IROs should give an informed view on Lewisham Foster Carers' performance. IROs will improve the quality and timeliness of their input to this process to promote improved quality assurance of fostering placements for children and young people.

- **Improved liaison across Children's Social Care** to highlight and address areas of mutual concern and development, for example, input to Care Scrutiny Panel, prevent delays to care planning for children and improve the quality assurance of placements. This will assist and promote placement stability and wider (health, education and personal) outcomes for children and young people.

- **Timeliness of the Annual Report.** The Service must ensure that the Annual Report is completed in the early summer and not produced too late in the year and therefore, ceases to be of relevance to the Social Work Service in terms of improvements and progress.

IRO Annual Report 2015/16