

## **Summary**

The report provides an account of the performance of Kent's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service for children in care. The areas covered in this report include:

- Section 1 – Background information
- Section 2 – Workload
- Section 3 - IRO practice and performance, including findings from feedback surveys
- Section 4 – Social work practice and performance
- Section 5 – Conclusion and recommendations

In addition to this annual report, the IRO service provides quarterly quality assurance reports to the Specialist Children's Services divisional management team and its Area management teams.

The quality of IRO reporting on some issues has been hampered by capacity issues within the IRO service which have impacted the ability of IROs to maintain an appropriate level of oversight and monitoring between review meetings.

A summary of the report will also be produced for presentation to Kent's Children in Care Council, renamed by children and young people to 'Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYC) and for inclusion on the OCYC website.

## **Section 1: Background Information**

### ***The role and responsibility of IROs***

The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plan for children in care reflects each child/young person's needs, and that the actions needed to achieve the plan are identified and implemented effectively within specified timescales.

The way in which IROs are expected to undertake their tasks are set out in the IRO Handbook, which forms part of the regulations and statutory guidance set out in Volume 2 of the Children Act 1989 – Care Planning, Placement and Case Review. Since April 2011, IROs are expected to oversee the quality of practice with respect to the whole child's case, including in between review meetings.

The current statutory duties of the IRO (section 25B [1], The Children Act 1989) are:

- Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case
- Participate (usually as chair) in any reviews of the child's case
- Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority. IROs are expected to arrange to have contact with children in care before the day of their review meetings

IROs also now have the power to:

- **Adjourn reviews** (regulation 36 (2)) if they are satisfied that the local authority has not complied adequately with all the requirements relating to the review (such as consulting the child/young person, parents etc).
- **Freeze decisions** until a child in care's review has been held that involve any unplanned change to the child's accommodation that would impact on their education (especially at key stage 4), changes of placement where the child has been settled and established for some time, and changing their legal status before the age of 18 years.
- **Raise concerns** through the local authority's formal dispute resolution process, which should have a timescale of no more than 20 days.
- **Refer cases to the Children and Families Court Advisory Service's** (CAFCASS) legal section (regulation 45), including the use of a concurrent referral at the same time that they instigate a formal dispute resolution.

### ***About Kent County Council's IRO service***

The IRO service is managed under the Family and Social Care Directorate of Kent County Council, within Specialist Children's Service's Children's Safeguarding Unit. The role of the County IRO Manager is undertaken by the Performance and Quality Assurance Manager for children in care.

The service currently consists of 2 teams:

- The East Kent and Asylum team
- The Mid Kent / West Kent and Asylum team

Each team comprises of 7.5 FTE IROs and is managed by an IRO Team leader. The IRO service is also supported by 3 administration officers. Two of the services IROs (1 in each team) are dedicated to working with unaccompanied asylum seeking children; who are deemed looked after by virtue of the Hillingdon Judgement (2003).

The IRO service has also had a role in monitoring the performance of Kent County Council's social work practice pilot (delivered by Catch 22). This is one of 5 phase 1 SWP pilots sponsored by the DFE, which is ran up to March 2012 and is being externally evaluated with the findings expected to be published by the DFE in June 2012. The IRO service created a specialised IRO post to focus on overseeing practice and pathway planning of care leavers (relevant and former relevant children) for the duration of the pilot.

Capacity within the IRO service is being increased by an additional 7 IRO posts; from 15 to 22 FTE IROs (an effective increase of 46%), which is expected to come into place from September 2012. This is expected to

reduce overall caseloads from an average of 120 per full time equivalent (FTE) IRO to 82 per FTE IRO.

The IRO service has a key role to play in helping to reduce overall numbers of children in care through ensuring that care plans are both cogent and implemented effectively in a timely way. The increase in IRO capacity will enable the service to meet more effectively the full range of its role and responsibilities, which will also contribute to preventing children drifting in care and being looked after for longer than necessary to promote their welfare and safety.

### ***Training and development***

All IROs receive regular supervision from their IRO team leader every 4 weeks. Team meetings take place every 2 months and are alternated with 2 monthly IRO practice meetings. The IRO Manager holds a county meeting every 6 months and an annual away day is also held to enable the service to look at key areas of development for improving its practice and delivery of the service. IROs are encouraged to attend the South East Region IRO Network meetings; at least 2 IROs attend each meeting, which provides an opportunity to share ideas and best practice with IROs in other local authorities.

IROs are consulted about their training needs and a program of training is provided to IROs through the Children's Social Services Professional Development Team.

## **Section 2: Workload**

At the end of March 2012 Kent County Council was looking after 1804 children and young people (1618 citizen children and 186 unaccompanied asylum seeking children. This represents a net rise of 105 (6.1%) children/young people over the year 2011/12 (April 2011 to March 2012).

The average number of children who became looked after each month is 82.6, while the average number of children ceasing to be looked after each month is 74.3 – a net increase of around 8.5 looked after children per month.

An increase of 105 children in care is equivalent to the caseloads of 1.4 fte IROs (*based on maximum caseloads recommend in Volume 2 of the Children Act 1989 of 70 per IRO*).

### ***Number of reviews chaired***

A total of 5128 reviews were chaired in 2011/12. This compares with 5023 in 2010/11 and 3929 in 2009/10 – an increase of 2% and 30.5% respectively.

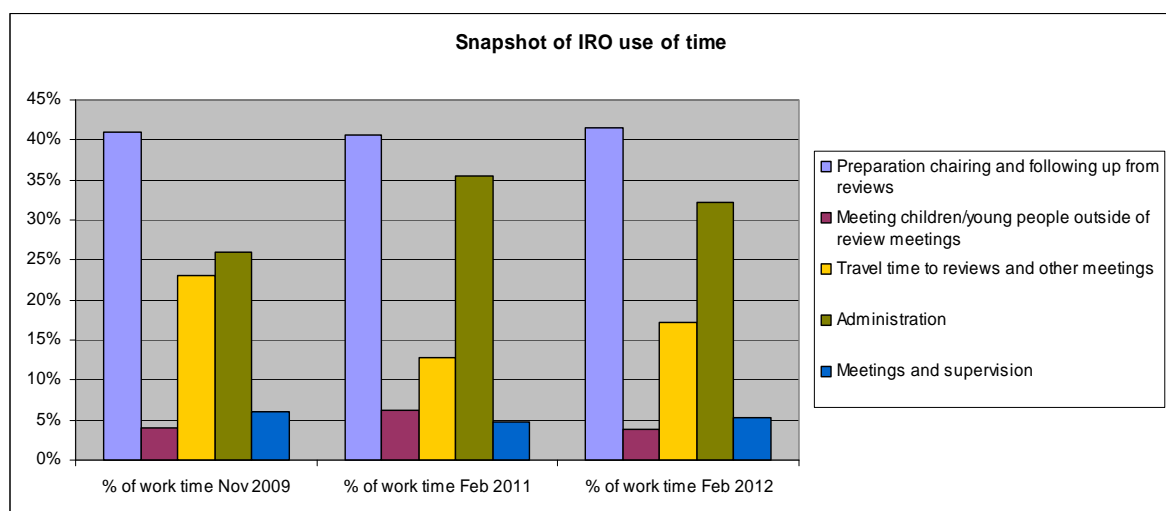
A total of 1344 reviews were chaired in the final quarter of the year, which represents an increase of 9.9% when compared with quarter 1 (1231) (April to June 2011) and an increase of 4.8% when compared with the quarter average (1282) for the year.

The increase in the number of reviews required to be chaired due to the rise in the number of children/young people being looked after is compounded due

to the fact that children newly looked after require more statutory reviews in the first 6 months than thereafter.

### ***IRO Activity***

In February 2012 the IRO service undertook a 1 week audit of its activity in order to establish how much time IROs spend on different tasks. The findings from this audit are presented in the bar graph below, along with findings from similar audits undertaken in 2010/11 and 2009/10.



The time spent by IROs on administration has increased since 2009/10; from 26% to 32.3%. Time spent by IROs travelling to and from reviews has reduced over this period, although when these two areas of activity are combined it shows that there has been relatively little change in the amount of time IROs allocate to these tasks (approximately 49%).

IROs spend around 41% of their time preparing and chairing and following up issues from looked after review meetings. Relatively little time (3.9%) is spent by IROs in maintaining contact with children and young people in between review meetings. The increase in IRO capacity and resultant reduction in caseload size for each IRO will enable IROs to dedicate more of their time to maintaining case oversight, following up issues in-between reviews, challenging poor practice and maintaining greater contact with children and young people.

## **Section 2: IRO performance**

### ***% of reviews chaired by the IRO service***



The average % of reviews chaired by the IRO service for 2011/12 is 95.2% (97.9% including safeguarding unit QA officers). While performance has increased over the year (from 97.4% in quarter 1 to 98.4% in quarter 4), this represents an annual drop of 1.6% when compared with performance in 2010/11 (99.5% overall).

The Mid/West Kent and UASC IRO team chaired 7.2% more reviews (720; 53.6%) than the East Kent and UASC team (624; 46.4%).

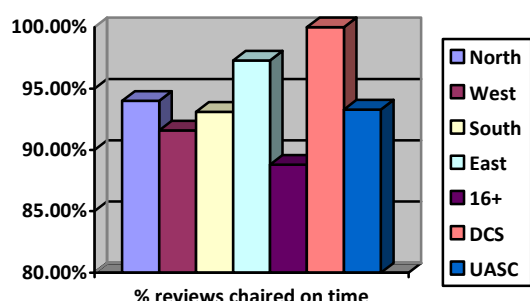
The operational Children's Social Services teams' chaired 107 reviews in the year; 2.1% of all the reviews chaired; an increase of 1.6% when compared with 2010/11.

### **Reviews chaired within statutory timescales**



Performance in relation to the % of statutory reviews chaired on time has been consistently high since 2005 - above the national average and statistical neighbours, which are at around 91%.

This year's performance on this national indicator (NI66) has not yet been finalised although provisionally this is at 95.8%. This represents a slight improvement of 0.6% from performance in the previous year (at 95.2%). There has, however, been a slight drop over the year, with performance for the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter being at 93.8%. Performance in relation to the new Area/service structure for quarter 4 is shown in the graph below.



### **Change of review date**



From the final quarter period of 2011/12 (January to March 2012) the IRO service has been collecting data on the number of children/young people's where a planned review meeting has been cancelled.

During this period, 22.8% of all reviews chaired had a request made for a change of review date; 30.9% originating from the IRO, and 38.7% from the child/young person's social worker.

This is an area of practice where the performance data highlights a need for improvements in practice. Not only can a change of review date increase the risk of reviews not taking place within statutory timescales, it can also increase the likelihood that the review will be chaired outside of the IRO service (via team leaders) under the local authority's contingency protocols.

IROs do have statutory powers to postpone reviews when sufficient information is not available to determine the cogency of care plans. This is not believed to be the reason why IROs are presenting so high a % of changes of reviews. The main reasons for reviews being cancelled are:

#### **IRO**

- IRO sickness
- Communication issues between IROs and district teams.
- Adjourned /postponed review due to lack of paper work
- Family emergency

### **Social worker -**

- Venue not booked
- On leave
- In court
- Double booked
- Absence of social worker /supervisor (training, off sick)

### **Other (Foster Carers, Family, School, Doctor etc...)**

- Child has an exam
- Family unable to attend
- Family bereavement
- Foster Carers attending court
- Change of placement

The process for how the IRO service communicates internally and externally (with operational social work teams) is being strengthened as a result of this finding. The IRO service has also asked that social workers only request a change of review date once they have liaised with the IRO and this has been approved by the relevant service manager.

Service managers are encouraged to raise any concerns about reviews being changed by IROs to the relevant IRO team leader and/or the Performance and Quality Assurance Manager (LAC).

### ***The % of review minutes completed and distributed within 15 days***



The statutory guidance under Volume 2 of the Children Act 1989 (e.g. IRO handbook, DFE 2010) requires review minutes to be completed and distributed within 20 working days of the review meeting. The first 15 working days are used as a benchmark for the IRO to produce the minutes and distribute these to the relevant Service Manager for sign off - who then arranges distribution to participants within 5 working days of receiving them.

The overall average for 2011/12 is 78.4% of review minutes completed and distributed by IROs within 15 working days, with performance showing an improvement over the year so that in the final quarter (January to March 2012) this had reached 84.5%; an improvement of 9.9% when compared with quarter 1 (April to June 2011).

While there has been a general improvement in performance on this area of practice it remains an area of weakness for the service – particularly in relation to establishing greater consistency in practice overall. This is evident when looking at the full range (days) for the completion and distribution of review minutes by IROs for quarter 4, which is between 1 to 65 days.

*During quarter 4, 3 reviews (0.3%) had their review minutes distributed within 60-65 days, while 10 (1.1%) were distributed within 51 to 65 days, and 20 (2.2%) between 36 to 65 days. 176 review minutes (19.5%) were distributed by the IRO between 16 and 65 days; 66 (7.3%) between 16 and 20 days.*

The planned increase in the number of IROs is expected to lead to a reduction in caseload sizes, which will assist performance in this area.

Work is also taking place to establish the performance of operational Specialist Children Services teams in distributing review minutes to participants, so that overall performance in relation to completion of reviews within 20 working days can be established. *Indirect evidence from the survey of foster carers undertaken between February and March 2012 suggests that current performance may be as low as 37% of reviews being distributed within this time period.*

### **Participation of children/young people in their reviews**

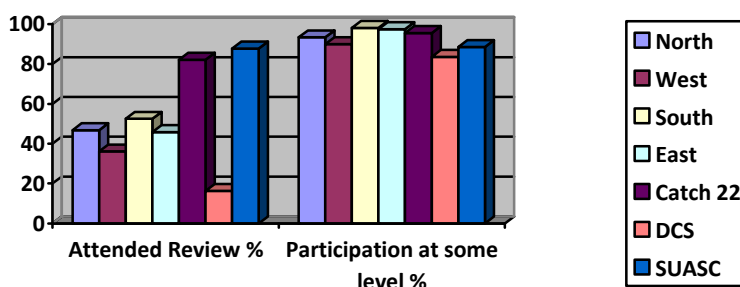


The IRO service and the operational social work teams have joint responsibility and accountability for delivering this area of practice.

For the year 2011/12, 94.8% of children/young people participated at some level and 5.2% (213) of child/young people did not participate in any form at all. The overall average for children/young people attending their review meetings, excluding children under 4 years is 59.2% (2330).

When compared with quarter 1 performance with respect to the % of children / young people attending their reviews (62.6%) performance in quarter 4 has dropped slightly (by 5.4%) to 57.1%

**Graph to show Participation Levels for quarter 4**



Future reports will include information on the numbers of children/young people who have been enabled to chair their own reviews.

### **Escalation issues**



Identification and escalation of issues is undertaken through the local authority's issues resolution process, which complies with the requirements set out in the IRO Handbook (DFE, 2010).

Information about the escalation of children's cases by the IRO service started to be collected during the final quarter period of 2011/12 (January to March 2012). Out of 1191 children/young people's cases IROs reported on during this period, 72% (858) were escalated at some level in order to resolve an issue that needed to be addressed to ensure that the child's plan was cogent and/or being implemented effectively.

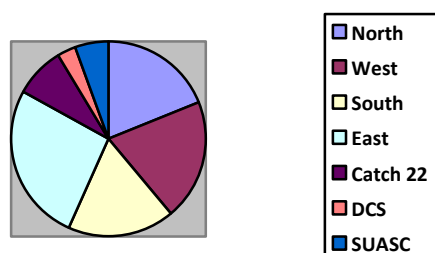
In relation to the level of escalation, the Q4 period data only records up to IR3 (Assistant Directors) - not IR4 and IR5 which focus on the Director for Specialist Children's Services and Corporate Director for Families and Social

Care respectively (although it is known that only 1 child's case for formally referred at levels IR4 and 5 during this period).

Future reports will provide information at all levels of the escalation process.

The majority of cases escalated were at the informal stage (56.1%), while 11.1% were escalated to the first level of the formal dispute process (IR1) (i.e. team leaders), 4.8% at IR2 (service managers), and 0.08% at IR3 (Assistant Directors).

Graph to show Escalation Issues for  
quarter 4



While performance and practice around care plans is the most common issue escalated by IROs (20.9%) it does not correlate with the level of concern about care planning identified from the QA online case audit program, where data for March 2012 suggests 34.8% of cases audited are inadequate. The findings from two audits conducted in 2011 around the quality of care plans for looked after children also highlighted more significant levels of concern.

These anomalies between the quality assurance measures would seem to suggest that IROs are not yet escalating the full number of issues that require improvements in the level of practice being delivered. The way in which IROs establish the quality of practice is an area that is being given more robust attention – particularly in relation to the potential for IROs to place too much reliance on documents and other information such as Looked After Children review part 1 Integrated Children's System (ICS) exemplar, which is provided by the child's social worker, rather than closer scrutiny of children's ICS case file.

The impact of high IRO caseloads should not be underestimated in relation to their ability to challenge casework practice, although the current variance of practice between IROs on this area is a significant factor.

### Feedback from surveys

During 2011/12 the IRO service put in place a number of surveys in order to ascertain the quality of the service, based on the views of children and young people, foster carers, and social workers involved with children in care. A summary of the findings from these surveys is presented below:

***Children and young people's views*** – 2 surveys were run during 2011/12; one in July 2011 and a second survey from January 2012.

102 children/young people responded to the second survey (67% being male) and with the majority of respondents (75%) aged 14 to 17 years (7% were aged less than 10 years). The response rate shows a slight improvement



when compared with earlier survey in July 2011, where only 55 children/young people responded.

93% of the children and young people said that they knew they had an IRO and that they also knew their name (96% stated this in the earlier survey).

69 children (68%) said they met with their IRO before their looked review meeting. The earlier survey in July 2011 showed that 76% of children/young people responding had met with their IRO.

81% of children/young people responding to the survey said that they felt the review was helpful (the earlier survey found 82%) and 88% said that they felt the review meeting takes into account their wishes and feelings (95% in the earlier survey).

Typical examples of the types of positive comments made by children and young people about their experience of IROs and reviews are presented below:

**“I like that you can express your feelings and say what you don’t and do like.”**

**“It was helpful because things are sorted out for me.”**

**“You can say what you want to and they listen to you.”**

**“Everyone is concerned about me and made a plan for my future.”**

**“Everything gets covered that I want.”**

**When I hear good things about myself. They listen to what you have to say.”**

**“That the IRO explains things well.”**

The types of negative comments made by children and young people are:

**“Wish not to have them. Get up too early.”**

**“Nothing, it comes and goes. Sometimes they are important if they’re going on about my future.”**

**“Nothing, need to go home and go to sleep.”**

**“Don’t like them! Boring!”**

The majority of children and young people responding to the survey were happy with their reviews and said they did not want anything to be changed. 21 children/young people, however, did suggest changes, which focussed on the following issues:

- Make them shorter and less boring

- Be more welcoming (have drinks and biscuits and a nicer room)
- Have less people at the review meeting
- To be told in advance who is attending
- Have the review on a day and time and at a venue that is suitable to the child/young person

### ***Feedback from foster carers***

149 foster carers responded to the IRO survey, which took place from February 2012.

91% of foster carers responding to the survey rated the IRO service as being satisfactory or higher; with 71% stating it was good and 31% stating that it was excellent.

81% of the carers said that the IRO spends time with their child/young person before the review.

82% felt that the review was appropriately managed by the IRO, which rose to 92% when those carers giving a 'partial' rating are included.

82% felt that issues from the child/young person's care plan were discussed properly at the review (91% when those carers giving a 'partial' response are included).

37% said that they received a full review report within 15 working days of the review

72% felt that the review minutes accurately reflected the discussion at the meeting, which increased to 81% when those stating it was met 'partially' are included.

90% of carers felt that the quality of the review minutes were satisfactory or better – with 32% of carers rating the quality of the review report as extremely good.

Only 32% of carers felt that the IRO always demonstrated sufficient levels of case oversight. This increased to 66% when responses 'almost always' (18%) and 'most of the time' (16%) are included.

12% of carers felt that there was little evidence from the IRO that they demonstrated any consistent level of case oversight.

53% of carers rated the service as satisfactory or better in relation to being able to contact the IRO between reviews.

Examples of positive comments made by carers are:

**“Children I care for have been with me for over four years and we’ve had the same IRO. This helps the child enormously particularly when social workers seem to change. She is very approachable.”**

**“The IRO I have had involvement with is excellent. I cannot praise her enough – thanks.”**

**“The IRO is always on time and fully up to date with the child’s needs. It has been very beneficial to the child that they have not had a change in IRO.”**

**“Thank goodness for the IRO – they are a sensible voice in a mad world!”**

**“Having the same IRO over 8 years has helped with good quality reviews.”**

Suggested areas for improvement raised by foster carers were:

- Speeding up time to distribute IRO review minutes
- Some IROs do not demonstrate sufficient evidence of challenging poor practice
- IROs and reviews need to be more child/young person friendly to enable children and young people to communicate their views effectively

### ***Feedback from social workers***

73 social workers responded to the IRO survey, which took place from January 2012; the majority of whom were career grade social workers (60%). The sample also included social work assistants (12%), senior practitioners (8%), Principal Social Workers (7%), and one team leader. Administration staff accounted for 9.5% of the sample.

Overall, 91% of respondents rated the IRO service as satisfactory or better; 67% rating the service as good or better.

78% of respondents to the survey felt that the IRO service was satisfactory or better in its responsiveness (54% good or better).

85% felt that they were given details of the time and venue of reviews within a reasonable timescale.

54% felt that the IRO spent sufficient time talking with the child/young person before their review, which increased to 74% when those giving a ‘partial’ rating were included.

77% felt that the review is appropriately managed; 84% when ‘partial’ responses are included.

82% felt that the IRO takes into account the child/young person’s views. Only 78% felt that the social workers views were taken into consideration fully and 80% with respect to the views of other professionals.

78% of respondents felt that all the issues stemming from the child’s care plan were covered sufficiently at the review meeting (87% if those giving a ‘partial’ rating are also included).

Only 47% of social workers said that they had received the decisions and recommendations from the IRO within 5 working days of the review taking place.

74% felt that the review minutes accurately reflected the review meeting discussion.

82% of social workers felt that IROs demonstrated case oversight between review meetings most of the time or better.

The majority (85%) also felt that they could contact the IRO between reviews to discuss issues and notify them of relevant changes.

Examples of positive comments made by social workers about IROs are:

**“They structure the meeting, keep it on track and give each person equal consideration. The child is kept at the forefront.”**

**“I have had some complex cases where the view of the IRO is very important to the family/court; however they have not always been.”**

**“IROs are very helpful, approachable and proactive in my experience.”**

Suggested areas for improvement are:

- Shorten review meetings
- Improve the consistency of the service
- Increased contact by IROs with children and young people between review meetings
- Reduce the number of reviews that get re-arranged
- IROs need to demonstrate a greater understanding of the pressures and challenges facing front-line social workers

From April 2012 the IRO service has arranged that all surveys will be run continuously in order to allow children/young people, carers and social workers to enable feedback throughout the whole year. The survey has also been extended to include other professionals involved with children in care and arrangements will be made to enable their parents to also communicate their views.

Work with the Virtual School Kent (VSK) is also taking place to ensure that the findings from the surveys are summarised on the Children in Care Council (OCYC) website, including how the IRO service is responding to the views of children and young people to improve the service.

## **Section 4: Social work practice and performance**

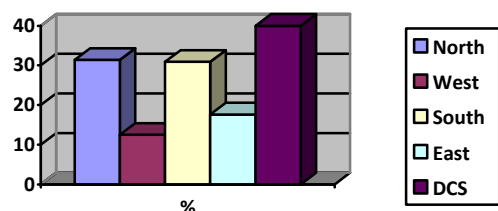
### ***Late notifications of reviews***



Performance in relation to the % of late notifications has improved slightly over the year – from a high point in quarter 2 (July to September 2011) (42%). The average % of late notifications for the year 2011/12 is 35.1%.

During quarter 4, the IRO service received a late notification of a child/young person becoming looked after for 45 (23.6%) of the 191 citizen children/young people who began to be looked after during this period. There were no late notifications with respect to unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

**Graph to show Late Notifications of Reviews Quarter 4**



*Data for May 2012 (13.1%) suggests an ongoing reduction in the number of late notifications of children/young people becoming looked after.*

### **Completion of LAC review part 1**



Over the whole of 2011/12, IROs received a completed Looked After Review part 1 exemplar prior to the review meeting in 92.7% of cases. This represents an improvement of 6.5% from the previous year's performance (86.2%).

Performance in relation to this area of practice has improved overall throughout the year from 89% in quarter 1 (April to June 2011) to 92.7% in quarter 4, although dropping slightly from a high point in quarter 3 (97.1%).

### **Statutory visits**



For the whole of 2011/12, the IRO service data suggests that 93.9% of children / young people whose cases were reviewed by the service were having statutory visits within timescales. This represents an improvement of 7.9% when compared with 2010/11.

This data suggests that practice with respect to statutory visits improved over 2011/12, with an increase of 5.6% over the year; from 87.1% in quarter 1 (April to June 2011) to 92.7% in quarter 4 (January to April 2012), with high points achieved in quarters 2 (96.7%) and 3 (97.6%).

While this finding presents a positive picture of social work practice in this area there are concerns about the validity of the finding as they contradict with findings from other audits that have looked at evidence on looked after children's ICS case files and which suggest a lower level of performance.

Due to capacity issues within the IRO service, it is possible that IROs have been relying too heavily on reports such as the Looked After Review part 1, which include reference to statutory visits, rather than scrutinising the children's ICS case file. Audits undertaken outside of the IRO service, for example, have frequently found visits recorded on the Looked After Review

part 1 exemplar form to include supervised contact and also not evidenced on the child's ICS case file.

### **Core assessments**



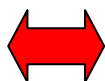
Over the whole of 2011/12 the IRO data shows that a core assessment was in place in 88.4% of the children/young people's cases reviewed. This reflects an improvement from 2010/11 performance (67%) of 21.4%

There was a general improvement throughout the year by 12.3% between quarter 1 (72.8%) and quarter 4 (85.1%). High points in the year were achieved in quarters 2 (95.7%) and 3 (95.7%).

One note of caution with the IRO findings can be highlighted when this is compared with the findings from the Quality Assurance Online Audit Program, which found a slightly higher proportion of children/young people's cases to be inadequate with respect to core assessments. This may simply be because the Quality Assurance online audit data does not distinguish between children's needs groups and also that IROs have not been recording the quality of core assessments in the way that the data has been collected and recorded.

Future performance data by the IROs service will focus more on the quality of core assessments.

### **Care Plans**



Overall performance over 2011/12 with respect to children in care having care plans in place (84.2%) has improved only slightly from performance in 2010/11 (81.8%), while performance at the end of 2011/12 dropped below the average to 79.1%. Throughout 2011/12 there has only been a marginal improvement in performance between quarter 1 and 4 (1.7%). Quarter 2 (89.4%) and 3 (91.2%) showed slightly better performance with respect to care plans.

*Work is being undertaken within children's social services and the IRO service to improve understanding of what constitutes a good plan, so that IROs can more effectively assess the quality of these plans and use their statutory powers to improve practice in this area.*

### **Health referrals**

The initial intention of this performance measure was to focus on performance around referrals for initial health assessments, as this is an area of practice that requires particular focus given anecdotal findings in previous years of late referrals for initial health assessments and average completion times of around 3 months.

It has been found that some IROs have been measuring performance for all referrals (including annual health assessments) instead of focussing specifically on referrals for initial health assessments.

The quarter 4 data shows generally high performance in this respect of all health referrals (94.8%), which is consistent with significant improvements in performance around the % of children and young people who receive an annual health assessment (90.3% for 2011/12).

Future reporting will focus exclusively around performance on referrals for initial health assessments, which remains an area of concern. This includes monthly reports to the Director for Specialist Children's Services on referral times for all children/young people beginning to be looked after.

### **Health Action plans**



90.5% of children/young people in care were found to have a health action plan in place. There has been an overall improvement in this area over 2011/12 by 30.9% when compared with performance in 2010/11 (59.6%). Over the period of 2011/12 performance increased by 8.5% from quarter 1 performance (83.1%) to 91.6% in quarter 4.

### **Personal Education Plans (PEPs)**



The IRO service works closely with the Virtual School Kent (VSK) to monitor performance in this area.

The average for 2011/12 was 93% of children/young people having a PEP in place, which represents an improvement of 41% when compared with performance in 2010/11 (52%). During 2011/12 there has been an overall improvement from quarter 1 (75.8%) to quarter 4 (92%) of 16.2%, with a high point in quarter 3 (99.6%).

### **Additional practice issues identified by IROs**

A number of additional practice issues have been identified by IROs, which have been grouped into 3 generalized themes followed by a summary of good practice issues identified by IROs.

#### **ICS**

- Updating key information on children's Integrated Children System (ICS) case files – change of legal status, change of care plan etc
- The late entry onto ICS case files when children and young people become, or cease to be looked after can create confusion and unnecessary work.
- There are still issues with ensuring that children and young people's looked after status start and end dates are entered onto ICS within 24 hours.

#### **Other agencies**

- There continue to be difficulties in getting referrals accepted by Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), as well as long waiting lists to be assessed and receive treatment.
- With respect to transition to adult services, practice is not consistent across the county; often agreement and plans for transition are left until just prior to a young person's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday - creating unnecessary anxiety and a lack of fluidity in care planning and permanence. Alternatively, young people are transferred to the 16plus care leaver

service until their 21<sup>st</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> birthday and then transferred to adult services, which fractures the social work relationship.

### **Social work practice**

- Frequent changes of social worker and its affect on care planning and continuity of the social work/child/young person relationship.
- Life story work not being undertaken or completed.
- A requirement for clarity regarding the updating of core assessments and/or Action and Progress records (APRs) to ensure the changing developmental and other needs of the child/young person are met.
- Completing demands on social work time, which impact on performance in ensuring review recommendations/decisions are implemented prior to the next review or within specified timescales.
- Lack of notification of significant events and the intention/action of children/young people leaving care to the IRO.

### **Good Practice Issues**

- The introduction of specialist children in care teams which enable the development of greater levels of expertise and experience.
- The development of a 'Good Care Plan Guide' to support improvements in the quality of care planning.
- There are some really good examples of practice being undertaken by social workers across the county – details of these cases are shared with relevant social worker and managers when identified.
- Practice Improvement Programme (PIP) providing a consistent message regarding social work practice with children in care.

## **Section 5: Conclusion and recommendations**

The IRO service has undertaken a considerable amount of work to strengthen its mechanisms for quality assuring practice and performance. Quarterly reporting to senior management teams within Specialist Children's Services with respect to quality assurance of practice is well embedded. The IRO service has a much better understanding of its own strengths and areas where further work and improvement is required. The capacity issues that have impacted significantly on the service and its ability to undertake all of the responsibilities within the IRO Handbook (DFE, 2010) effectively, including case oversight between review meetings, are also being addressed. This will leave the IRO service in a strong position to oversee and quality assure practice with children in care – providing strong and constructive challenge in addressing poor practice and drift as and when this occurs.

A number of performance and practice issues have been identified where further improvement in service delivery is required, which can be separated into 7 areas.

- 1) Improving the quality of care planning and the implementation of plans within the child/young person's timescales
- 2) Increasing the level of children and young people's participation and involvement in decision making at their reviews – including



- i) Supporting children and young people to take a more direct role in chairing their own reviews
  - ii) Introducing measures to encourage more children and young people to attend their reviews
- 3) Enabling IROs to maintain greater levels of contact with children and young people between reviews
- 4) Greater consistency in reducing timescales for the completion of IRO review minutes
- 5) A greater emphasis by IROs in challenging poor practice when this is identified through overseeing each child/young person's case in-between review meetings
- 6) Increasing and improving the quality of information about practice standards with respect to children in care. This includes an increased focus on:
  - i) Statutory visits to children and young people
  - ii) The quality of care plans, core assessments and the social worker's report for the review meeting (i.e. Looked After Review part 1)
  - iii) Improving timescales for making referrals for initial health assessments
  - iv) The distribution of review minutes to participants within 20 working days of the review
  - v) Referrals and accessibility to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- 7) Explore further ways to reduce administration demands on IROs time.

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