

**Independent Reviewing Service**

**Annual Report 2013-2014**

**BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO CORPORATE PARENTING CABINET  
COMMITTEE**

**April 2014**

**REPORT TO THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR – CHILDREN**

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## **Introduction**

1. It is a requirement of the manager of the IRO service to produce an Annual Report for the scrutiny of Members of the Corporate Parenting Committee line with the regulations under the Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance Wales (2004).
2. The IRO service has an authoritative role, in assuring the quality of care planning is achieved. The guidance states this report must identify good practice but must also identify issues for further development, including those where urgent action is required. The guidance urges the local authority to make effective use of the reports from its IRO service so that it can be satisfied that its services can achieve best outcomes for the children and young people concerned.
3. This Annual Independent reviewing Officer (IRO) report focuses upon the work of the IRO service from April 2013 to March 2014. As part of the Quality Assurance role, the report will contain performance information in respect of the statutory reviewing of children who are looked after by Bridgend County Borough Council, and children subject to Child Protection Case Conferences. The report will consider an analysis of the quantitative data with information drawn from internal reports. The qualitative data is drawn from IRO monitoring forms, supervision and Team Meetings.
4. The report also includes information that relate to regulatory requirements in respect of: resolving case disputes; IRO caseloads; participation and consultation of young people in their Reviews, challenges and achievements in the reporting period, in addition to service priorities for 2014-15.

## **Legal Context**

5. The appointment of IRO's by local authorities is a legal requirement and their core functions are governed by the legal regulatory framework outlined below:
  - The Adoption and Children Act 2002 detailed the requirements on Local Authorities in respect of the appointment of IROs.
  - The Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance (Wales) 2004.

## **Core Functions**

6. The Independent Reviewing Service has an important Quality Assurance function and works towards ensuring all children within the care of Bridgend

County Borough Council has a robust effective care plan. This plan is aimed towards improving outcomes for children and young people in providing a stable and secure childhood where their health, education and emotional wellbeing is promoted through effective care planning. It is the function of the Independent Reviewing service to ensure the care plan is appropriate and progressive in Safeguarding whilst meeting all identified needs.

7. Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) are required to independently review the Care Plans of all Looked After children and those children with a Child Protection Plan and subject the child protection register (CPR). The Review will include consultation with and attendance of relevant agencies (health, education and Police etc.) and will usually include the child/young person, their Social Worker, carers and family members. Time scales for LAC Reviews are set out in the Children Act 1989. First Review will take place within 28 days, next Review three months following the initial and then six months from the second Review. Subsequent Reviews are held every six months unless there has been an unplanned change of placement where a Review will need to be held within 28 days.
8. Within Bridgend County Borough Council, the IRO Service has the following roles and responsibilities;
  - To Review and oversee the effectiveness and the appropriateness of Care Plans for those Children and Young People the Council has responsibility for. This includes the chairing of all Child Protection Conferences, Looked After Children Reviews, including children placed for Adoption and Pathway Plans for young people moving towards independent living.
  - To ensure all LAC Reviews and Children Protection Conferences take place within compliance of the legal timescales.
  - To Chair all Child Protection Conferences on behalf of Western Bay Safeguarding Children Board.
  - To provide a report on each Review held which includes recommendations to any changes to the Care Plan and to monitor the progress of the Care Plan by tracking cases between Reviews.
  - To ensure the child/young person's rights are protected.
  - To ensure the voice of the child is heard throughout the care planning process and to monitor the child's wishes and feelings have been recorded.

- To support and advise through a mentoring and coaching role to social work staff in relation to effective care planning.
- To raise IRO concerns where they have been identified through the agreed protocol and to escalate unresolved concerns regarding care planning to the appropriate level of the Local Authority's management structure.
- To consider the need to seek independent legal advice and possible referral of a case to Cafcass. Under these circumstances where the IRO believes the Local Authority has failed in any significant respect to prepare a child's Care Plan; to implement Review Recommendations; in Reviewing a Child's Case the Local Authority has failed to act on or resolve to the satisfaction of the IRO; there has been a breach of the above at a senior management level within a reasonable timescale.
- The quality assurance function of the IRO service aims to highlight concerns around specific cases and also any trends relating to care planning practice. It also has a duty to highlight good practice.
- All Looked After Children are subject to Health Plans to promote their health and development. The IRO's have responsibility to ensure the Health Plans are monitored and meeting the children's needs within the Looked After Children Reviewing process.
- All LAC children are subject to a Personal Education Plan (PEP). The IRO is responsible for ensuring this is in place and regularly reviewed to ensure all educational needs are being met.

### **Composition of the IRO Team**

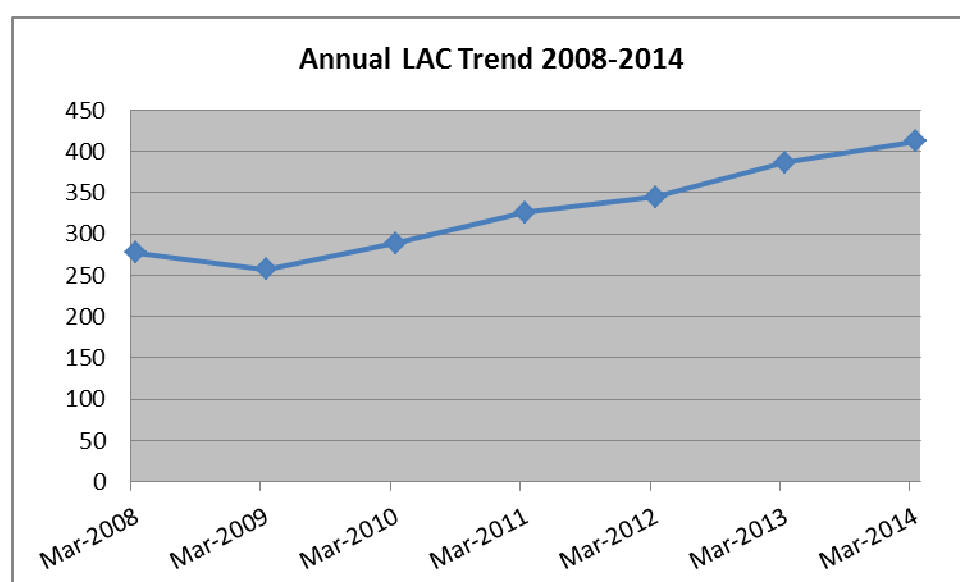
9. There are currently 5 full-time posts and 2 half time posts. These individuals are very experienced in working with children and families. Four of the IRO's have been in post for a substantial period of time and the newest members joined the service in October and November 2013. We have one vacancy which is being covered by an agency worker at present. One of the long terms IRO's has recently secured an IRO position in Newport and left his position at the end of May 2014. His decision to leave Bridgend's IRO service was influenced by the outcome of Job Evaluation which had recommended a pay cut for the IRO post. Two new full-time IRO's have recently been appointed and have recently taken up their posts with Bridgend.
10. The IRO's have a wealth of experience between them and all have been qualified as Social Workers for a substantial period of time (one IRO has 40 years Social Work experience) with all having worked directly in the

safeguarding and LAC arena. The IRO Service Manager has worked in children services for 20 years.

### **Caseload**

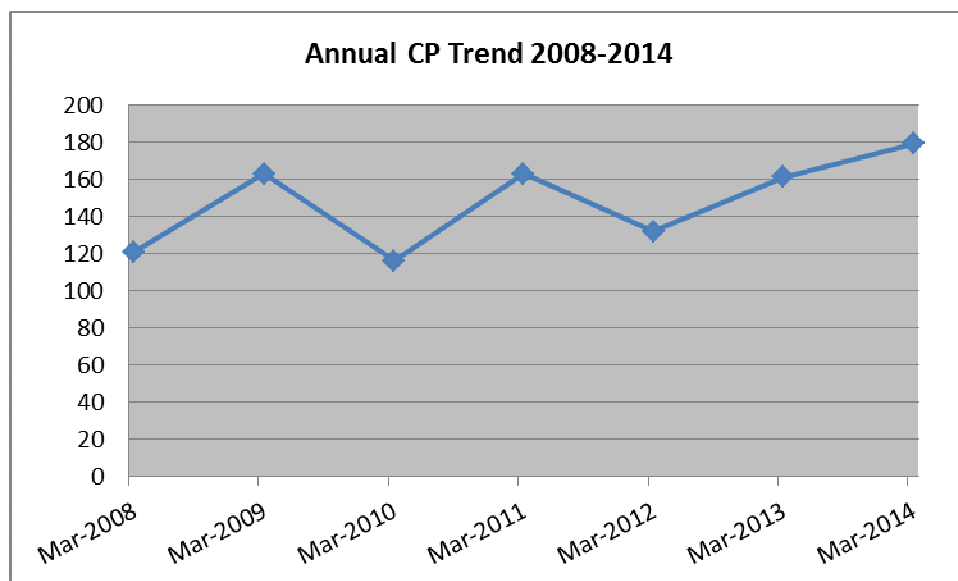
11. In line with other Local Authorities throughout Wales, Bridgend County Borough Council has seen an increase in the number of Looked After Children (LAC) and the number of children subject to a child protection plan. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2014 there were 412 looked after children in Bridgend. This is a 6.5% increase on the previous year. There were also 179 children on the child protection register, an 11.2% increase on the previous year. These increases have inevitably placed considerable pressure on the IRO service and in particular IRO caseloads.

The table below shows the annual LAC trends between 2008 and 2014



Yr Ending	No of LAC
Mar-2008	277
Mar-2009	257
Mar-2010	289
Mar-2011	326
Mar-2012	345
Mar-2013	387
Mar-2014	412

The table below shows the annual trend for children on the Child Protection Register between 2013 and 2014



Yr Ending	No of CP
Mar-2008	121
Mar-2009	163
Mar-2010	116
Mar-2011	163
Mar-2012	132
Mar-2013	161
Mar-2014	179

12. As with all other departments within children services, this increase in numbers have impacted upon the IRO service and increased pressure in meeting compliance and statutory obligations. IRO caseloads have risen in line with this increase in LAC and CPR population with full-time caseloads ranging from 103 to 118 and part-time between 52 and 69. These caseloads are above that recommended within national guidance which states that 'it is estimated that a caseload of 50-70 children for a full-time equivalent IRO. An Ofsted report 'Independent Reviewing Officers: Taking up the Challenge? Published in June 2013, recommended a benchmark of 50-70 caseload. Recent enquiries across neighbouring authorities of IRO services show an average caseload number of 80 per full-time equivalent. The recent inspection by the CSSIW had commented on the high caseloads carried by IRO's within Bridgend County Borough Council. (We are awaiting publication of report)

**TOTAL NUMBER CASE WITHIN THE IRO SERVICE (AT TIME OF WRITING)**

Child Protection	Looked After Children	Looked After Children and those subject to a Pathway Plan	Pathway Plan	Total
188	349	64	75	676

**Business Support**

13. In relation to LAC Reviews the IRO Chairing Service has one dedicated full time administrator who performs a number of functions. These include liaising with Social Workers and chairs to arrange dates and venues for Initial LAC Reviews; forward planning and organising LAC invite letters/consultation papers for Reviews, creating the ICS documents on DRAIG, co-ordinating cancelled/re-arranged LAC Reviews; collating monitoring/feedback forms, dealing with telephone queries regarding LAC Reviews, distributing minutes as well as validating LAC data for Performance Indicators. Under the regulations, the Local Authority is 'required to provide sufficient administration support to facilitate the delivery of an efficient and effective review process'. However, due to the significant increase in the LAC population, the business support provision to the chairing service is under review as the current provision relies too heavily upon the one full time post holder who has experienced her workload increase considerably over the many years that she has been in post.
14. Child Protection Reviews are supported by four CP clerks who collate information and reports for conference, verify attendance, take the minutes of conference and distribute minutes; maintain the Child Protection, Pre Birth and Temporary Register; arrange venues for review conferences and create relevant ICS documents (conference document, initial core group and initial CP visit); oversee level one work and validate data for PI's. Alongside the clerks there is one full time and one part time administrator. The full time administrator will chase up the conference requests after strategy meetings, for initial conferences arrange a venue and telephone invitees excluding family, co-ordinate invites for review conferences, log and process GP invoices for GP reports provided, chase up professional reports.

**IRO Service Development and Achievements**

15. Since the appointment of the relatively new IRO service manager, she has ensured that regular monthly Team Meetings take place where other

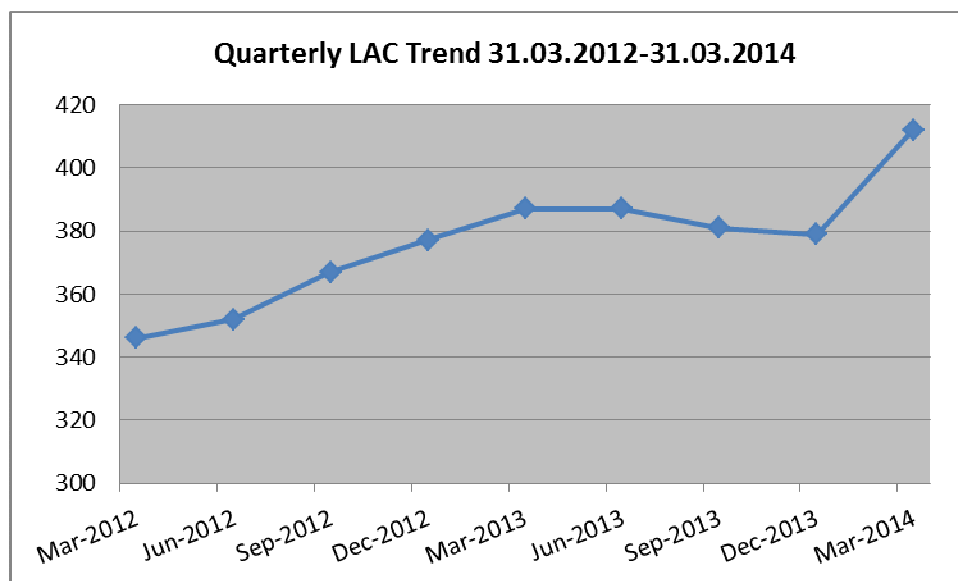


professionals are asked to attend for the first hour to discuss any changes or updates on new services being introduced which will affect the role of the IRO or the children we work with. The following have attended Team Meetings; NSPCC, Knowledge Management to discuss Junior ISA's for LAC, Legal Services to discuss changes within the revised PLO, Cafcass Cymru to build closer links which has included the Regional Director providing briefings on the changes to revised Public Law Outline and the implications for the IRO. The service also held its annual "Development Day" where the role of the IRO was revisited in line with the changing role and responsibilities of the Independent Reviewing Officer. In April 2014 a Senior Practitioner from HMP Prison Parc attended a team meeting to discuss arrangements for Reviewing LAC & Pathway Plans for Young People whilst on remand and detained in prison.

16. IRO's attend the quarterly "All Wales IRO days" on a rota basis. The information is then reported back and shared within the IRO Service.
17. In October 2013, as part of the quality assurance role, the Manager of the service introduced a new IRO monitoring form to enable the service to monitor quality and standards within Safeguarding services. Despite an initial poor return of these forms, there have been a number of emerging general themes which has been highlighted below.
18. The IRO Service also introduced a new "Feedback Form" aimed at seeking views and comments from Social Work colleagues on the services that are provided by IRO's. To date responses have been generally poor but those forms that have been returned were all positive in terms of the standards of work provided.

#### **REVIEWING ACTIVITY:**

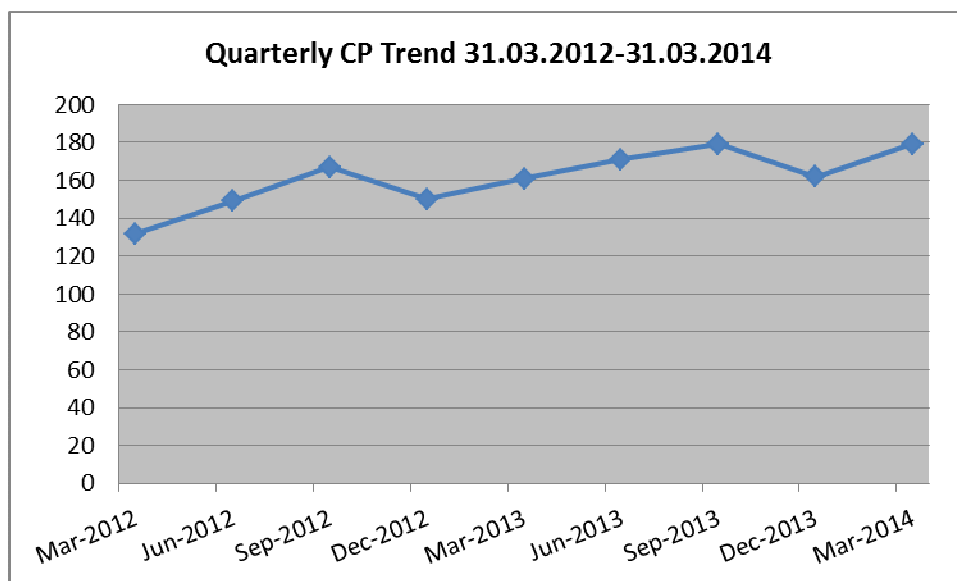
19. As mentioned above, the number of Looked After Children increased to 412 on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2014. These figures have followed a steady increase over recent years (see chart below) with a significant increase between January and March 2014. This was influenced by a number of large sibling groups over becoming accommodated during this period, including one sibling group of six.



Qtr Ending	No of LAC
Mar-2012	346
Jun-2012	352
Sep-2012	367
Dec-2012	377
Mar-2013	387
Jun-2013	387
Sep-2013	381
Dec-2013	379
Mar-2014	412

Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Lac Rev Due 106	110	76	82	71	108	102	96	72
LAC Rev. in compliance 103	105	70	81	67	105	98	96	72
% compliance 97%	95%	92%	99%	94%	97%	96%	100%	100%

20. As with Looked After Children, the number of children subject to child protection (cp) plans has seen a steady increase over the last few years. Our quarterly figures show a slight drop in numbers from September to December 2013, but the numbers have further increased during the first three months of 2014.



Qtr Ending	No of CP
Mar-2012	132
Jun-2012	149
Sep-2012	167
Dec-2012	150
Mar-2013	161
Jun-2013	171
Sep-2013	179
Dec-2013	162
Mar-2014	179

Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
CP Conference Due 88	51	69	96	53	72	72	49	77
CP Conf. in Compliance 80	48	56	89	45	71	63	48	74
% Compliance 91%	94%	81%	93%	85%	99%	88%	98%	96%

### Pathway reviews

21. In addition to the above activity, the IRO service also chair and monitor the Pathway Plans for young people aged 16+. Young people between the ages 16-18 years old are subject to both a Care Plan and a Pathway Plan and are subject to regular reviews. At the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2013, there were 64 children within this cohort. "Relevant" and "former relevant Young People" aged 18+ will be subject to Pathway Plans and regular six monthly reviews until they reach 21 years of age or in certain cases (Higher Education) until they reach 24 years old. Approximately 150 Pathway Reviews taking place each year.

## Qualitative Information

22. Information has been taken from Team Meetings, Supervision with the IRO's and IRO monitoring form. The Monitoring Form was introduced into the IRO service in October 2013. Despite a poor response rate, there appears to be emerging general themes.

### General Themes:

23. The IRO service is not reaching as many children and young people as it would like, through consultation around the care planning process. Not all children and young people are attending their Reviews which is impacting on the IRO's ability to meet directly with children prior to their reviews being held. Consequently we wish to improve the rate that children and young people who are involved in their care planning.
24. IRO's continue to express concerns about the Pathway Planning Process with Plans often these are not place and of often the quality of them needs improving.
25. Delay with cases being transferred between Social Work teams and Just Ask+ is a common theme which has resulted in certain cases being held within safeguarding teams for too long.
26. Due to an above average turnover of front line Social Workers within safeguarding teams during the past year and with the appointment of a significant number of newly qualified practitioners, this has placed additional pressure on IRO's who are providing additional support and mentoring to new staff, particularly around the care planning processes.
27. The standard of social work reports for case conferences is reported as inconsistent with some being very good, including good assessment and analysis, but others being not so good with little analysis and in some times an absence of an updated care plan. Due to competing work pressures on social workers some reports are received late by the IRO and in some cases have been received on the day of conference itself. The fact that on occasions reports are not being presented until the day of conference can result in families not being provided with the opportunity to fully digest the information provided prior to conference.
28. IRO experience of Health plans for Looked After Children indicates the Health assessments are of good quality.

29. IRO's have reported that PEP's are inconsistent and not always completed in a timely way.

### **Case Dispute Resolution**

30. Since July 2013 to March 2014, 12 cases have been initiated under the Internal Protocol Resolution process. All but one case are now closed having reached satisfactory resolution at the informal stage. These cases included concerns raised by IRO's about;
- Slow progress being made with Care Planning.
  - IRO's disagreement with the Care Plan.
  - IRO concern with progress being made within Pathway Planning.
31. In 3 cases, discussions were held and the matter resolved with the case being transferred to the Adoption and Permanency Team.
32. In 2 cases, discussions took place and timeframe put in place for the cases to proceed to reach a permanency outcome of Special Guardianship and discharge of the Care Order.
33. In 6 cases the matter was resolved at the informal stage and a plan of action put in place to ensure effective care planning was being achieved and the case progressing.
34. In 1 case, the matter is ongoing under the IRO Resolution Process at stage one.

### **Challenges**

35. The IRO service has faced a number of challenges over the last year; **Increase in LAC and CP population:** This has led to high caseloads and increased demands to ensure the CP Conferences and Reviews are held within compliance.
36. **The re-structure of Safeguarding Children Services:** in July 2013 had a significant impact upon the Independent Reviewing Service as a result of a number of cases transferring between the new safeguarding teams. As a consequence of this there were high numbers of cancellations and re-arrangements of LAC Reviews and Case Conferences arising out of unavailability of the newly allocated social worker at the point of case transfer. However, caseloads have now settled down and the process of Reviews is running smoothly with less re-arrangements being requested.

37. **Quality of Reports:** There continues to be a higher turnover of staff within the Safeguarding Teams which impacts upon the work of the IRO, in terms of standards of reports and information analysed. As stated above there are occasions when the IRO service is receiving reports on the day of conference and sometimes within an hour of the meeting taking place. Whilst this is a concern in itself, more importantly it impact on the ability of families to receive the reports with enough time to read and digest the information. It is good practice for the reports to be shared with families days prior to the conference being held.
38. **Staff morale:** within the IRO service was very low in June/July 2013 following the Job Evaluation decision to reduce salary scales. Despite regulations advising the IRO should be of a level of experience in line with that of a Team Manager, their salary has reduced. As a consequence, two experienced IRO's have left the Service and a third person has recently secured IRO employment in Newport.
39. **Caseloads:** IRO caseloads continue to remain at an unacceptable high level (see above). High caseloads and lateness of reports have impacted upon the IRO's time, compromising their role and responsibilities. For example, IRO's have said they are not able to meet with every child and young person prior to the Review and are often challenged in their ability to robustly track cases in between Reviews.
40. **Timely write ups of minutes of LAC Reviews:** have been a particular issue for IRO's to complete as a result of the increased work pressures arising out of higher caseloads. Some IRO's have had a backlog with their LAC Review minutes. However, this is monitored on a monthly basis and individual action plans are put in place to address the delay. Despite the increased pressure upon the service, priority has been to work towards ensuring all reviews and Case Conferences take place within regulatory timescales.
41. **ICT System:** The current ICT systems and processes prevent the Independent Reviewing Service from running a more efficient service. Discussions are continuing to address these difficulties.
42. **Capturing the Voice of the Child:** The Introduction of the "Monitoring Form" in September 2013 has highlighted the need for greater improvement in consultation and engagement with children and young people in order to capture the voice of the child within the care planning process. The IRO's have also acknowledged the increase in caseload challenges their ability to meet their obligations in this area of their work and efforts are being made to address this need.

43. **Efficiency:** The increase in the LAC and CPR population has put greater pressure upon the Independent Reviewing Service in meeting our compliance and quality assurance obligations. This increase in workload has also put pressure upon Business Support and their capacity levels in meeting demands. Difficulties presented with the current postal system have created delays with Invites and Consultation Documents being sent out in time for the Reviews. Consequently, Case Conference Reports and LAC Review documentation are often not being received prior to the meeting which places increased pressure upon the IRO. The IRO service is exploring options to ensure this area of the service becomes more efficient and effective. However, it is hoped this system will be improved with the introduction of the new mailing system.
44. **Resources:** As a result of the Increase in the number of Initial and Review Case conferences there has been pressure to identify appropriate conference accommodation. The lack of available rooms and the unavailability of other professionals have placed further challenges in ensuring the timescales are being met as required.
45. **Pathway Planning:** The IRO's have continued to express concern over the general quality of the Pathway Planning process. Matters have been discussed within the Department and further discussions are to be arranged to move this forward.
46. **Internal processes:** There have been a number of instances where by Social Work staff have not followed agreed processes which then impacts upon the IRO service. For example, the IRO service has 15 days in which to arrange a child protection conference following the strategy meeting which initiates section 47 enquiries. Due to the lateness in receiving these notifications this has placed increased pressure upon the service to ensure the Conference take place within compliance. Consequently, there have been a few examples where conferences have been held out of timescales. The IRO service is working with Safeguarding teams and Business Support to address this issue. Not withstand these small number of occasions during 2013/14 96.6% of all Lac reviews were completed within statutory timescales and 99.2% of all review case conferences were held within statutory timescales.

### **IRO Service Priorities 2014-15**

47. Reduce IRO Caseloads in line with the recommended caseload numbers. Increase the number of IRO's to enable effective scrutiny of the care planning process. Tracking cases between Reviews to prevent drift.

48. The IRO service to work with Team Managers and Training Department to ensure staff are fully aware of the role of the IRO and their legal responsibilities in Care Planning for Children on the Child Protection Register and for Children who are Looked After.
49. The IRO service to build upon their knowledge and understanding around their increased legal responsibilities under the revised PLO as provided through recent training events.
50. To build closer links between the IRO service, Advocacy and Cafcass.
51. Stabilise the Independent Reviewing Service following the changes in staffing and salary scale.
52. The IRO Service to continue to work with Team Managers to ensure social work reports are signed off and received three days prior to the Review/ Case Conference as stated within the regulations.
53. The IRO service to engage more with the Training Department .to ensure newly qualified Social Workers understand the role and function of the Care Planning process and the role of the IRO within that function.
54. The IRO service to plan a training day with the Just Ask+ service to work towards improving Pathway planning by revisiting existing processes and the legal requirements placed upon both services.
55. The IRO service to work with Just Ask + and ICT with a view to producing a more effective Care/Pathway Planning Review and LAC/Pathway Plan documents.
56. To work towards improving the current ICS templates with a view to the separation of the Reviewing documents which will improve efficiency in the distribution of the minutes.
57. To work towards Improved consultation with children and young people and explore ways to capture the voice of the child within the care planning process.
58. Improve processes to promote improved consultation and engagement with children, young people and families.
59. Extending the IRO Feedback form to include Children, families and other professionals.



60. To improve efficiency with distribution of Invites, minutes and consultation documents within the IRO service.
61. Continue to monitor and improve processes within the Safeguarding Teams to ensure Reviews and Case Conferences are held within compliance.

**Independent Reviewing Service Action Plan 2014-15.**

<b><u>Priority</u></b>	<b><u>Action to Support</u></b>	<b><u>By When</u></b>
Improve scrutiny and monitoring of care planning outside of Review Meetings.	Address high Caseloads  IRO to receive Reports 3 days prior to CP Conference and LAC Reviews.	<b><u>April onwards</u></b>
Improve consultation and attendance by children and young people at their LAC Reviews.	IRO's to encourage children and young people to attend and participate in their Reviews and Care Planning.  IRO's to ensure children and young people's wishes and feelings are heard and recorded throughout the care planning process.  IRO to work towards a service user friendly consultation document and to explore more effective methods of engaging with children and young people	<b><u>April onwards</u></b>
Monitor that PEP's and Health plans are progressed.	IRO's to improve rigour and scrutiny.	<b><u>April onwards</u></b>
Improve internal links to impact on improving care planning.	Improve links to: consultation, Safeguarding Team, LACE, Just Ask, Cafcass, Advocacy Service, LAC Health Visitors, CAMHS.	<b><u>April onwards</u></b>

	<p>Mentoring/coaching newly qualified social workers on the expectations of the IRO Service.</p> <p>Discussions and Consideration to be given to explore the possible introduction an “Outcome Template” within 5 days of the LAC Review.</p>	
<p>Improve scrutiny within the Children’s Directorate</p> <p>Develop a two way information sharing process with Western Bay Safeguarding Board</p>	<p>Regular quarterly meetings between the IRO service and the Head of Safeguarding.</p>	<b><u>June onwards</u></b>
<p>To improve care planning for all children supported within Safeguarding Services</p>	<p>Address IRO high caseloads</p> <p>Better links with mentoring role to newly qualified social work staff to provide advice and support.</p> <p>Regular Audits of children’s files.</p> <p>The IRO service are working to ensure reports are received three days prior to the conference (as stated within regulations) which will enable IRO’s and Social Work staff to discuss any contentious issues before the day conference.</p> <p>Develop mentoring links with Safeguarding and Just Ask + Teams</p>	<b><u>April onwards</u></b>
<p>Improve feedback and consultation with service users and other</p>	<p>Extend the feedback form to other professionals and families at Case</p>	<b><u>April onwards</u></b>

professionals	<p>Conference.</p> <p>Improve the consultation document for children and young people, carers and families.</p>	
Improve internal processes to ensure systems and processes are running robustly.	<p>Meet with Team Managers, Group Managers and Business Support colleagues to address the weakness in the internal process.</p>	<b><u>April onwards</u></b>
To develop more effective ICT support services. To assist in developing a more efficient IRO service with tackling delay in the distribution of minutes.	<p>To work to separate the Social Work report from that of the Independent Reviewing Officer.</p> <p>To work to merge the LAC/Pathway Review documents.</p>	<b><u>April onwards</u></b>

**Jaci Morgan**  
**Independent Reviewing Service Manager**

**4<sup>th</sup> April 2014**